

## ***A Raisin in the Sun* as feminist text:**

### **Racialised gender roles, female agency and representation across mediums**

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Tiivistelmä – Referat – Abstract <p>This thesis examines the role of the three female protagonists in Lorraine Hansberry's 1959 play <i>A Raisin in the Sun</i>. The thesis argues against the interpretation of the play as pro-integration and assimilationist and posits instead that there is an inherent radicalism in the play that reflects the feminist and political views of its author. The purpose of this thesis is to examine how the feminist themes are highlighted through the three female protagonists of <i>Raisin</i>: Ruth, Beneatha and Lena Younger.</p> <p>In order to further assess these themes, the 1959 play is contrasted with three screen adaptations, by Daniel Petrie (1961), Bill Duke (1989), and Kenny Leon (2008). This comparison is carried out with a particular focus on how the protagonists are represented in these adaptations.</p> <p>The thesis begins with a discussion of the historical context in which the play was written, set and performed for the first time. This is followed by a discussion of Hansberry's biographical background, in order to contextualise and clarify her political beliefs so as to better support the main arguments in the thesis. These arguments are also supported by the works of the Black feminist scholars Patricia Hill Collins, bell hooks, and Tricia Rose.</p> <p>The thesis examines the play and each of the three screen adaptations separately, presenting a close literary analysis of the play before contrasting it with the three films. The literary analysis discusses three core aspects of the play that serve as a rejection of racist and patriarchal values: the rejection of the American dream; the domestic sphere of the play; and the subversion of racialised gender roles and stereotypes. This analysis highlights the ways in which Black women experience a specific form of double oppression due to their race and gender, an experience that is reinforced by the use of racialised gender roles and stereotypes. This thesis argues, however, that Hansberry uses the female protagonists to reject these roles and the racist and sexist ideology from which they stem.</p> <p>The film analysis places the films within their temporal and socio-cultural contexts to observe how they reflect, highlight or undermine the three core aspects discussed in the literary analysis. This analysis reveals the significant role played by context in producing starkly different representations of the female protagonists.</p> <p>The analysis of these works, written and visual, demonstrates the enduring significance of Hansberry's famous play, which continues to be revived and performed. The conclusion underlines the importance of challenging representations that perpetuate racist and sexist ideologies, and of granting agency to groups that have long been under- or misrepresented across mediums.</p>		
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## Introduction

When Lorraine Hansberry's play *A Raisin in the Sun* debuted on Broadway on 11 March 1959, it was praised by both critics and the public alike. The play was nominated for four Tony awards, and awarded Best Play by the Drama Critics' Circle, making Hansberry the first African American recipient of the award. It has since then been adapted to film, perhaps most famously in 1961 starring Sidney Poitier, who revived his stage role as Walter Lee Younger, and has been revived on Broadway as late as 2014. As the first play written by an African American playwright to debut on Broadway, it received wide acclaim for its supposed universality. *Raisin* was seen by many as a story about overcoming racism "through homeownership and integration", particularly by white audiences (Rose 2014, 29). They celebrated the message it sent about the American Dream, that it could be achieved despite the obstacles of discrimination, racism and poverty. It is precisely because of this interpretation that the play has been canonised and taught in schools as a lesson about racial equality and integration (46). However, there were those who did not join in with the praise. Some critics and progressives deeply criticised both Hansberry and the play itself for its "integration-as-happy-ending", claiming that it was "written to please whites" (39). They critiqued its projection of a pro-integration, assimilationist, and colour-blind version of the American Dream. There were some who, in the midst of the civil rights movement, viewed the play as too conservative, lacking the radicalism that would be essential for revolution. The play was dismissed by some as simply another "kitchen-sink drama" that presented the stereotype of an 'emasculating' matriarchal family structure (29).

What both this praise and critique appear to overlook is the radical, sharply political and feminist perspective that is inherent to the play. More recently, scholars have begun to revisit Hansberry's famous play and reframe it in light of her own political beliefs and feminist activism. Scholars such as Tricia Rose, Erin D. Chapman, Cheryl Higashida and Imani Perry have argued against the widespread misinterpretation of the play in light of Hansberry's feminist and leftist radicalism. It is Hansberry's feminist attitudes which are of particular interest to me in this thesis. Feminist scholars such as Adrienne Rich and Margaret Wilkerson have claimed that Hansberry "muted" her feminism in *Raisin* (Chapman 2017, 48). I would argue that this perspective belittles the complexity and richness of the play. In her 1959 interview with Studs Terkel, Hansberry declared her aversion to overt messages in art, the type that "hits you over the head", renouncing them as "clichés" (Hansberry 1959).

Instead, Hansberry opts for a more subtle approach, one that demonstrated the way in which “[h]er craft had become too nuanced to read as propaganda” (Perry 2018, 100).

The feminist themes in *Raisin* are an aspect of the play that may appear to be lost amongst the more overt themes of racial struggle, housing discrimination and the pursuit of one’s dreams. Although the play’s feminist message may, at first glance, be more subdued than the themes for which the play was both celebrated and condemned, they are nevertheless still present. Hansberry’s art was inextricable from her politics. Her former husband and long-time partner, Robert Nemiroff, declared, “For Lorraine Hansberry insurgency was a necessity, an essence of the artist. A necessity inseparable from her blackness, her womanhood, her humanism.” (Nemiroff 2011, xx). As both artist and activist, Lorraine Hansberry believed that “all art must be political” (Perry 2018, 52). To view her work in light of only one of these aspects limits what could otherwise allow for a far more complex reading of *Raisin*. Hansberry’s position of “feminist, anticolonialist, and Marxist” should not be disregarded in the reading of the play (Perry 2018, 81). She was involved in political campaigns and activities, contributed to Leftist, lesbian, and feminist publications and was even observed by the FBI as a result of her participation in Communist and socialist movements (94). Recent scholars have also begun to discuss the extent to which Hansberry was influenced by one of the most iconic feminist texts of the twentieth century, Simone de Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex*. Regarding the work as a “textbook” (77) Hansberry claimed that it might “very well be the most important work of this century”, storing it on “the most available spot on her ‘reference’ shelf” (Hansberry quoted in Higashida 2011, 65). The fact that she was highly engaged with de Beauvoir’s feminism is indicative of her own feminist views, which, under close reading, can be revealed in her work. These views are presented to the reader and audience in a way that is perhaps less overt, but nevertheless still of significance.

It is precisely Hansberry’s subtlety and mastery of the “art of appeal – the use of comfortable conventions for the sake of political argument and subversions” that has perhaps resulted in so many readings that overlook the underlying feminist themes in *Raisin* (Perry 2018, 102). Set entirely in their home, Hansberry provides an intimate portrayal of the lives of the Younger family, a working-class African American family living on the South Side of Chicago in the late 1950’s. As the family awaits the arrival of a long-awaited life insurance cheque from the recently deceased head of the family, Big Walter, their dreams and desires are brought to light. The title of the play was sourced from a line in one of Langston Hughes’ poems, ‘Harlem’, and connects the play to Hughes’ “meditation on deferred dreams” (98). In his 1951 poem Hughes asks,

What happens to a dream deferred?

Does it dry up  
like a raisin in the sun?  
Or fester like a sore—  
And then run?  
Does it stink like rotten meat?  
Or crust and sugar over—  
like a syrupy sweet?

Maybe it just sags  
like a heavy load.

*Or does it explode? (2002)*

It is precisely the lingering question of “[w]hat happens to a dream deferred?” that Hughes poses in his poem that is explored in *Raisin*, as the contrasting dreams of the members of the Younger family form the central conflict in the play. The question of what to do with the \$10,000 cheque raises further questions of whose dreams are within reach and at what cost.

In the play, the conflicting dreams of the female characters are contrasted with one another to demonstrate the different positions African American women occupied in society at the time in which it was written. The goals of Lena ‘Mama’ Younger and her daughter-in-law, Ruth, both of whom are domestic workers and mothers, centre around the sphere of the domestic. They dream of moving out of their cramped apartment in a ghetto in South Side Chicago to their own home. For Mama, this is a long-term dream she has had since migrating from the South to Chicago. Ruth, on the other hand, is desperate to find a better place to raise her son and unborn child. This is a dream that Mama is ultimately able to realise, as she uses a portion of the money to put a down payment on a house for her family. The only house she is able to afford is located in Clybourne Park, a predominantly white neighbourhood. Although the decision to move to Clybourne Park is undoubtedly fraught with risk, as it was for many Black families moving into white neighbourhoods at that time, the Younger family eventually leaves the South Side for their new home. Mama’s daughter, Beneatha, dreams of finishing her education and becoming a doctor. She exemplifies a modern, feminist attitude which was arguably ahead of its time, as was Hansberry herself. Despite their conflicting goals and beliefs, however, the women are positioned alongside one another and together form the backbone of the family. Together they guide the play’s male protagonist, Walter Lee Younger, towards a decision that ultimately saves his dignity and helps to preserve his sense of self. It is through his dream of opening his own liquor store and becoming a businessman, that Hansberry highlights how the opportunities that were available to men and women at the

time were dependent upon gender. This and the juxtaposition of the different attitudes and social spaces the women occupy, serve to emphasize the feminist attitudes of Hansberry that are present throughout the text. It is this comparison that will be the main focus of the thesis, as I will clarify later in this introduction.

Hansberry's feminist position is further highlighted when her original text is contrasted with film representations of the play, as they either reinforce or diminish the themes present in her stage play. A comparison between three screen adaptations of the play and the original text may help to underscore how *Raisin* can be read as a feminist text. Each of the films I will examine were produced at different, and distinct, eras in contemporary African American history. The first film adaptation of the play was released in 1961, during the height of the civil rights movement. It was directed by Daniel Petrie and the screenplay was written by Hansberry herself. This adaptation starred members of the original Broadway cast, including Sidney Poitier, Ruby Dee, Claudia McNeil and Diana Sands. Released during an era of racial turmoil, the film had potential to be used as a means for Hansberry to explore the themes of her play further. She included scenes in the script in order to clarify what she felt was missed in the play and to avoid future misunderstandings of her politics (Perry 2018, 114-115; Rose 2014, 48). Disappointingly, pivotal scenes that portrayed the multiple layers and deep impact of structural racism were considered too political and never made it into the final version of the film (Perry 2018, 115). The Public Broadcasting Service, PBS, produced their own version of the play in 1989 as a part of their *American Playhouse* series. The political climate of the late eighties lent itself to allow for a more emotional and visceral exploration of a racist, patriarchal America. Finally, the most recent film adaptation, directed by Kenny Leon and released in 2008, once again allows for the examination of the representation of the female protagonists within a new context. Leon's version makes some of the feminist themes present in the play more explicit by exploring the lives of the Youngers outside of the home. For the first time, for example, the lives of all three of the Younger women are lent a more in depth portrayal. The visual medium of film lends itself to an analysis of the different ways in which the female characters are represented, and how feminist elements in Hansberry's original play are either heightened or dampened.

The following chapters will attempt to demonstrate the ways in which Hansberry's own political and feminist viewpoints are translated into *A Raisin in the Sun*. In Chapter One, I discuss the historical context of the play in order to highlight significant events and experiences in African American history that are key to understanding the period during which the play was written, set and performed for the first time. The chapter also explores

Hansberry's own past in order to contextualise and elucidate her political beliefs to demonstrate that they are an integral element in analysing her work. Using the works of Black feminist scholars bell hooks, Patricia Hill-Collins and Tricia Rose, I will position the play alongside key theories from these scholars to reveal the feminist themes in the play.

In Chapter Two, I analyse the play in order to highlight these themes. The literary analysis of *Raisin* will focus on three central aspects present in the play: the rejection of the American dream; the site of the play; and the subversion of racialised gender roles and stereotypes. I examine these aspects through a feminist lens, by focusing on the characters of Beneatha, Mama and Ruth. The main purpose of this analysis is to demonstrate how the three female characters' interactions with each other and Walter Lee suggest that Hansberry uses her play to reject and challenge racist and patriarchal values.

The third chapter of this thesis will provide an analysis of the three screen adaptations of the play. I analyse each film separately to consider the ways in which Beneatha, Mama and Ruth are represented on screen. I also discuss the socio-historical contexts in which each of these films were produced. From the studio-controlled adaptation of the sixties, to the uncensored PBS production of the eighties, to the signs of progress in the 2008 Kenny Leon adaptation, the screen adaptations were products of starkly different contexts. Spanning almost five decades, many significant societal and political changes occurred between each of these adaptations. This is why I include a discussion of these contexts in my analysis of how the Younger women are portrayed in the three productions. In Chapter Three I also compare the literary and film analyses in order to discuss the ways in which the female characters are represented in different media across different eras. To do so, I examine whether the three central aspects discussed in the second chapter translate visually in each of the screen renderings of the play to demonstrate how the different film reproductions undermine or highlight the feminist themes present in the original text.

Finally, the conclusion of this thesis aims to highlight the prevailing relevance of the play and considers possible reasons for why it continues to be revived and performed to this day. The recent body of work on both Hansberry's texts and her life as a writer, activist and person illuminate the significant impact she has had on the Black literary and feminist literary traditions. Given these recent works, it is evident that there is still much left to be examined. It is precisely because of this that I will also outline possible areas for future research.



## **Chapter One: Contextualising Hanberry's background, roots and politics**

Hansberry wrote *A Raisin in the Sun* during a period of great social and political unrest in American history. The play is set in South Side Chicago sometime after World War II, a time of immense racial and gender discrimination and oppression in both the US and across the world. Contextualising *Raisin* amongst escalating racial tensions and practices, widespread sexism, and the rise of movements against multiple forms of oppression may help to reveal the more radical elements in the play. Hansberry's own feminist and socialist activism suggest that these elements may also be discerned from her own work as an artist. The role that feminism plays in *Raisin* is particularly emphasised when examined alongside the work of Black feminist scholars, such as bell hooks, Patricia Hill-Collins and Tricia Rose.

### **1.1 Historical Background: The Great Migration, redlining and housing discrimination in Chicago's South Side**

From the outset of the play, Hansberry situates the reader and audience firmly within the home of a working-class Black family living on Chicago's South Side. Hansberry's detailed stage notes describing the scene as Ruth Younger starts her day imply the significance of the setting in the play. She describes the apartment as a place that has been forced to "*accommodate the living of too many people for too many years*" (Hansberry 1994, 23, emphasis in original). It is no longer a place of comfort but has been worn thin, a place where "*[w]eariness has, in fact, won...All pretenses but living itself have long since vanished*" (24, emphasis in original). Born and raised on the South Side herself, Hansberry's chosen setting was home to the majority of the African American residents of the city. The Younger family's cramped, roach-infested kitchenette apartment was not unlike the majority of homes in South Side Chicago, an area that had grown increasingly overpopulated and derelict as a result of prevailing racist practices, local white animosity and discriminatory federal housing programs (Coates 2014). The huge influx of African Americans to the city during the Great Migration resulted in a housing crisis that primarily impacted the Black residents and migrants. Many Black families were so desperate for decent living conditions and housing that those who could even risked moving to predominantly white neighbourhoods despite rampant white hostility (Coates 2014.). Neighbourhood associations, like the Clybourne Park Improvement Association in *Raisin*, were a result of this hostility and were supported by racist federal

programs established under Roosevelt's New Deal. As discriminatory laws and racial bias seeped into these programs, racism became institutionalised through the establishment of organisations such as the Home Owner's Loan Corporation and the Federal Housing Administration. These organisations implemented the practice of 'red-lining', the categorisation of neighbourhoods like the South Side as high-risk in terms of home mortgaging, the effects of which are still felt to this day (Coates 2014).

Subjected to discriminatory laws from the 1870s until the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, African Americans saw no end to the 'separate-but-equal' doctrine that defined the period during which the play was written. Although Jim Crow laws were a feature of the South, discriminatory practices and methods of enforcing segregation in the North prevailed nonetheless, albeit in a way that was more subtle than their southern counterparts. From the start of the twentieth century, Chicago's Black residents were mostly contained within what was essentially a thin strip of land, often referred to by whites as "the Black Belt" (Grossman 1989, 123). The colossal and sudden growth of the area's African American population was largely due to the large influx of migrants during the Great Migration. This was a mass migration from the rural South to the North and West that began during World War I and continued for six decades, forming a significant "turning point" in American history (Wilkerson 2010, 9). This migration of nearly six million Black southerners was triggered by a number of factors. The most significant of these was the brutal and violent enforcement of the Jim Crow laws of the South. One of the most horrific methods of enforcement was the practice of lynching. Terror lynchings were at their peak between 1880 and 1940, a period during which thousands of African Americans were lynched (Equal Justice Initiative 2017). Under the threat of physical violence and death, many Black families fled the South in search of a life safe from the dangers and demoralisation of "the southern caste system" (Wilkerson 2010, 10).

After WWI, many southerners also gravitated towards the north in search of greater employment opportunities. Prior to the war, the North held little interest in terms of work prospects as northern employers were disinclined to hire Black workers over European immigrants. After the war, northern industry was suddenly in need of workers and so began the "Northern fever" (Grossman 1989, 3). African Americans were driven to cities such as New York, Detroit, Chicago, Los Angeles and Philadelphia in search of humane treatment and better pay. Chicago, in particular, was a key destination due to its industries, for example meat-packing, which were well-known even in the Deep South. News publications also helped to fan the flames of prospective migrants' dreams. One of these was *The Chicago*

*Defender*, the “most widely read newspaper in the black South”, which painted a picture of a lively city that could offer a fresh start within a “vibrant and assertive black community” (4).

The period of the Great Migration is often divided into two waves, which took place before and after the Great Depression of the thirties (Greers 1998, 223). The first wave saw the formation of geographically concentrated African American communities in Chicago, the largest of which was located on the South Side. There was a huge influx of new residents into this relatively small area. Between 1910 and 1920, Chicago’s African American population increased from about 44,000 to just under 110,000, more than doubling in size (Grossman 1989, 4). By 1920, the South Side housed nearly 85% of the city’s African American population (Hirsch 1998, 3). Although migration slowed as the Great Depression hit, a second wave took place from 1940 to 1960. Confined more or less within the same neighbourhoods as a result of de facto segregation and racial discrimination, areas such as the South Side experienced a serious housing crisis as migrants relocated to the city. The population growth resulted in these condensed areas becoming overpopulated, leading to devastating living conditions for many South Siders (4-5).

The second wave of the Great Migration exacerbated the dire living conditions of the South Side. By the 1940s, areas like the South Side had grown “too small, too old, and too decayed to host old settlers and newcomers alike” (Hirsch 1998, 4-5). In 1940, when Hansberry was ten years old, the neighbourhood continued to become increasingly overpopulated and dilapidated, with many homes lacking even basic amenities. In *To Be Young Gifted and Black*, Hansberry captures the atmosphere of the neighbourhood. Of the South Side she wrote,

I think you could find the tempo of my people on their back porches. The honesty of their living is there in the shabbiness. Scrubbed porches that sag and look their danger. Dirty gray wood steps. And always a line of white and pink clothes scrubbed so well, waving in the dirty wind of the city.

My people are poor. And they are tired. And they are determined to live.

Our Southside is a place apart: each piece of our living is a protest.

(Hansberry quoted in Nemiroff 1995, 45)

Her description reveals in an intimate way the sense of neglect and dereliction that encapsulated the South Side and the inherited resolve of its residents to survive the gradually deteriorating conditions in which they were forced to live. It was precisely because of the worsening conditions that Black residents had no choice but to begin looking elsewhere.

After WWII, the strict borders of the South Side “ghetto” began to shift and expand out of necessity (Greers 2014, 223). It was also during this time that the South Side ‘Black Belt’ was transformed by urban development plans put into place by the federal government. Neighbourhoods were torn down and inhabitants were displaced and moved to public housing projects where they were met with equally squalid conditions. Vertical ghettos replaced former neighbourhoods as racist attitudes and practices “necessitated the creation of an ‘institutional ghetto,’ a city within a city” to which Black residents were relocated (Hirsch 1998, 15). As incomes also rose amongst some of its residents, more and more Black Chicagoans suddenly found themselves in a position where the staple of the American Dream – the home – seemed to be within in their reach. However, the structural racism present within Chicago’s “real estate industry...widespread and virulent neighborhood ‘protective’ associations,” and the collusion of the city’s public agencies (especially the police)” functioned alongside national programs to further cement the housing discrimination that had already severely impacted the city’s Black communities (Greers 2014, 221). The practice of redlining was one of the tools at the disposal of federal government used to ensure the exclusion of African Americans from the housing market.

Home mortgage redlining was a nationwide process that involved categorising Black neighbourhoods as high risk areas, allowing for banks and loan associations to deny residents of those areas mortgage insurance. If they did agree to offer mortgages, this was typically done at worse rates. Areas that were predominantly made up of Black communities were devalued due to the widely held belief that “the entry of even a single non-white resident into a neighborhood necessarily translated into the decline of housing values” (Greers 2014, 221-222). This practice serves as an example of the consequences of institutionalised racism as it perpetuated the segregation, ghettoization and unequal status of African American citizens. These practices were mostly enforced by a new agency, the Federal Housing Association, that was formed to carry out Roosevelt’s New Deal policies and programs, one of which was the mortgage insurance program. This program served as a means to protect banks, insurance companies, savings and loan associations, and to benefit private homeowners. Under the New Deal mortgage program, the value of properties was required to either be sustained or grow during the twenty-year period of the mortgage (209). Agencies such as the FHA were, at least in part, created for the specific purpose of Black economic and racial suppression. Unlike other New Deal programs, the FHA was “carefully and intentionally crafted by southern congressmen...committed to retaining the segregationist inequalities of the Jim Crown American South” (206). It worked alongside the Home Owners Loan Corporation, the HOLC,

to carry out mortgage risk assessments and draw redlining maps that would impact African American communities for decades.

Redlining practices in Chicago had devastating, long-lasting effects on the economic development of many Black neighbourhoods in large areas of the city. The city serves as a key example of this practice, as it is the only city that underwent extensive redlining of which a definitive FHA redlining map still exists. The extent to which the FHA and HOLC carried out redlining is astounding. In 1938, nearly a third of the city's areas were redlined. At the same time, the growing demand for housing resulted in increased pressure for many African Americans to relocate, especially those who could now afford to do so. However, because the areas in which they lived were redlined, and cash payments were not a possibility for many, they couldn't rely on standard loans to finance their new homes. The only option for many Black families was to use a form of funding which offered "financing that was a form of 'rent to own'", known as instalment land contracts, or ILCs (Greers 2014, 223). In reality, these ILCs were simply another form of racialised housing discrimination and were used by land speculators to take advantage of Black communities who were left with no alternatives. In these types of contracts, the occupant was not the owner of the property, leaving them unprotected against the threat of seizure. Residents with ILCs were at risk of losing their home, and any accumulated payments or equity, simply if they missed or were late on monthly payments (224). ILCs were typically owned by land speculators or "blind trusts" financed by white individuals and state-chartered savings and loan associations (224). It was then the state, as well as white individuals and businesses, that directly contributed to the financing of these highly exploitative practices.

Another of these explicitly racist practices that was supported by the federal government was the use of restrictive covenants. In Chicago, the FHA condemned Black neighbourhoods by classifying them as high risk, both due to the housing conditions and the "inclusion of racially biased elements in the underwriting standards the agency developed" (Greers 2014, 222). In doing so, they endorsed the propagation of racially restrictive covenants, clauses that further disenfranchised Black communities. Restrictive covenants were legal agreements added to deeds to prohibit the sale, lease or occupation of land by non-whites and were used nationwide. The use of restrictive covenants in property deeds was not made explicitly illegal until the 1968 Fair Housing Act. They served as yet another tool to exclude African Americans, and other minorities, from the home mortgage market, a cornerstone of the American Dream. In Chicago, "whites looking to achieve the American dream could rely on a legitimate credit system backed by the government. Blacks were herded into the sights of

unscrupulous lenders who took them for money and for sport” (Coates 2014). They clearly were not allowed access to the same dream. These racist and manipulative financial arrangements and legal agreements led to crushing long-term effects in African American Chicagoan communities. These are effects which still last to this day, with discrepancies in living conditions and income so huge that “it can be said that blacks and whites do not inhabit the same city” (Coates 2014).

## **1.2 Biographical Context: Hansberry’s Politics, Feminism and Activism**

In *Raisin*, Hansberry is able to paint such an intimate portrait of life in the South Side ghetto because she witnessed first-hand the effects of segregation and housing discrimination. Her family was directly impacted by the racially restrictive covenants that propagated Jim Crow practices also in the North. Hansberry’s father, Carl, was a real estate entrepreneur known as the “kitchenette king” (Perry 2018, 9). He made a living converting apartments into kitchenettes in an effort to provide homes for Black residents in the midst of the persistent housing shortage. When Hansberry turned seven, Carl was able to purchase a building, despite the fact that it was covered by a restrictive covenant. This, in turn, led to a legal dispute with the Woodlawn Home Owner’s Association. As the legal battle over the property ensued, the Hansberrys moved into the building and were threatened by white mobs. The threat of violence was so severe that Hansberry’s mother was driven to protecting their home with a “German Luger pistol” while her father was out of town (13). On one occasion, a member of the “howling white mob” who had already hit, spat and cursed at the Hansberry siblings as they left to school, threw a dried piece of cement through the window, only narrowly missing Hansberry’s head (13). Ultimately, the legal battle was taken to the Supreme Court and the Hansberry family was able to keep the property through the *Hansberry v. Lee* decision. Echoes of this harrowing childhood event are very much present in *Raisin*, which reveals the ways in which themes and events in the play are closely tied to Hansberry own experiences.

In fact, Hansberry’s life was also intricately linked with the type of working-class Black family that she chose to portray in *Raisin*. Despite Carl’s relative entrepreneurial success, the Hansberry family resided in the same building as Carl’s tenants. Although they came from a middle-class background, her family was “shuttered into the ghetto” on the South Side not unlike that of the Younger family (Perry 2018, 10). The majority of her peers

came from working-class backgrounds, and she was closely connected to both them and their circumstances (11). Describing the Black middle-class as “atypical” in an interview, she explains that she chose to portray a working-class family because “they are more pertinent, more relevant, more significant, and most important, most decisive in our political history and our political future” (Hansberry 1959). Her exploration of the Black working-class in her art is perhaps only a natural outcome of her leftist values which blossomed in spite of her father’s staunch capitalism (Perry 2018, 11). The connection she had with her peers seems to have contributed to her inclination towards socialist beliefs. She was surrounded by prominent figures of the Black community from a young age, including Black intellectuals, activists and leaders. Many of these were family friends or associates, including “several well-known Black socialists” and members of the Communist Party (21). Growing up with these encounters “in the throes of the most urgent Black political debates of the day”, Hansberry’s political and activist inclinations seemed almost inevitable (21). As she grew older, she became increasingly involved in leftist, socialist and communist movements, political campaigns and activism. During her days at the University of Wisconsin she was involved in leftist circles and was a member of the Young Progressives of America to support Henry Wallace’s presidential campaign of 1948. Her socialist beliefs and activities deepened when she moved to Harlem, New York, in 1951, the epicentre of Black art, political movements and activism.

It was during her life in Harlem that Hansberry become more involved in activist activities, participating in protests and campaigns on behalf of various leftist causes. She was able to give voice to her burgeoning political and feminist views through her work at *Freedom*, a leftist newspaper that hired her in 1951 (Perry 2018, 47). *Freedom* attempted to fight against heteropatriarchal and racist views by representing “the conjunctions between Black freedom, Third World national liberation, working-class struggle, and women’s rights” (Higashida 2011, 49). It was during her time there that she met other pivotal figures of both Black female and leftist leadership, including W.E.B. Du Bois, Shirley Graham Du Bois, Alice Childress and Paul Robeson, the paper’s publisher (57). It was the blend of the “wealth of Black female leadership and talent” that helped give the publication a “distinctly protofeminist” tone (49). Although she resigned from the paper in 1954, she continued to be vocal about her feminist views. In 1957, she wrote a letter to *Ladder*, a magazine published by the Daughters of Bilitis, the first all-lesbian organisation in the U.S. In the letter she discusses the ways in which “[w]omen, like other oppressed groups of one kind or another, have particularly had to pay a price for...the second class status imposed on us” (Hansberry

quoted in Perry 2018, 80). The letter is revealing of her engagement with twentieth-century feminist theory, in particular that of Simone de Beauvoir.

Scholars such as Perry, Higashida and Chapman have all noted how deeply influenced Hansberry was by Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*. It played a big role in helping to solidify her feminist views, acting as a sort of "theoretical scaffolding" from which *Raisin* was formed (Higashida 2011, 26). This can be seen in Hansberry's writing on de Beauvoir's influential work. True to her intellectual nature, Hansberry was critically engaged with the content of the work stating:

The problem then is not that woman has strayed too far from 'her place' but that she not yet attained it... She has gained the teasing expectation of self-fulfilment without the realization of it, because she is herself yet chained to an ailing social ideology which seeks to always deny her autonomy and more – to delude her into the belief that that which in fact imprisons her the more is somehow her fulfilment. (Hansberry quoted in Perry 2018, 86)

Hansberry's notes on *The Second Sex* reveal her own feminist beliefs and show an astute awareness of the position women occupy in a patriarchal society. Simone de Beauvoir's work also helped to support Hansberry's awareness of the dual oppression of Black women, providing her with "the inspiration to build a feminism that did not exclude race but treated it as a necessary part of understanding race, and race as necessary for understanding gender" (Perry 2018, 78). The 'ailing social ideology' to which Hansberry refers is what Patricia Hill Collins describes as the "intersecting oppressions" of race, gender, sexuality and class that is perpetuated by the dominant culture (2002, 8). It is precisely due to this intersection, whereby Black women experience a double oppression due to their race and gender, that Hill Collins argues for a need for U.S. Black Feminism. She posits that because Black women experience a very specific form of oppression, it is imperative to also form an approach to feminist thought that explicitly encompasses the intersectional nature of this oppression. Hill Collins asserts that this is approach "aims to empower African-American women within the context of social injustice" so long as the systems of oppression remain intact (2002, 22).

This approach also serves as a useful tool to analyse the female characters of Hansberry's play, as they too experience the interlocking injustices of a racist and patriarchal society. To examine them using more overarching notions from mainstream feminist theory or African American criticism does not account for the way in which "[r]acism is a gender-specific phenomenon" (Hill Collins 2004, 7). Therefore, it is perhaps more pertinent to analyse the Younger women using this intersectional approach. In her book *Feminist Theory*:



*From Margin to Center*, cultural critic and feminist scholar bell hooks also discusses the importance of applying intersectionality to feminist thinking. She is highly critical of what she views as the short-sightedness of mainstream feminists, such as Betty Friedan, who based their thinking on the “impact of sexist discrimination on a select group of women” (hooks 2014, xiii). She stresses the importance of considering the “interlocking nature of gender, race, and class” and shifting towards a mode of thinking where these factors are not mutually exclusive (xiii). Hooks emphasises that the recognition of racism as being “fundamentally a feminist issue” will allow for the establishment of a more inclusive feminist movement (53). She puts forth a key strategy of this movement, one that could serve as a mode of resistance against the “political system of imperialist, white supremacist, capitalist patriarchy” (16). This strategy, termed “Sisterhood”, or “political solidarity among women”, encourages women to unlearn sexist and racist ideology in order to become better allies for one another (43). She describes this as a specific form of solidarity that is formed by overcoming hostility so that an underlying understanding can exist in spite of differences and disagreements (67). In *Raisin*, the three Younger women may have differing perspectives, dreams and beliefs, and yet together form the foundation of the family. They provide one another with the type of solidarity that hooks describes. I will examine the relationship they have with both one another and with Walter Lee using Hill Collins’ concept of ‘intersecting oppressions’ and hooks’ notion of Sisterhood in order to reveal the undercurrents of feminist thought present in the play.

I will also use Tricia Rose’s theory of ‘(inter)personal justice’ to discuss the importance of Hansberry’s choice to locate the play within the domestic sphere (2014, 33). Rose states that “(inter)personal justice emphasizes the impact of structural forms of inequality on interpersonal dynamics...influenc[ing] the quality and sustainability of political thought and action” (33). She uses this theory to examine the way in which the intimate site of the home allows for an exploration of the deep, personal impact of structural racism. She argues that these types of spaces have long been neglected in terms of their political potential as they have been viewed in terms of domesticity and associated with women. (Inter)personal justice argues for the pivotal role played by the formation of close, in this case primarily female, interpersonal bonds “in producing or suffocating social justice movements” (33).

It is these types of bonds that form the basis of the relationships between the female characters in *Raisin*, relationships that can be explored in depth precisely because of the setting in which they have been formed. After examining Hansberry’s own background it is perhaps not so surprising that she chose to situate the play in such an intimate sphere. She

grew up experiencing first-hand the damaging effects of institutionalised, racist practices and the impact they can have on both a public and private level. Her years as an activist and artist in New York undeniably helped to instil in her a sense of the political urgency of the socialist, feminist, and black nationalist movements. In *Raisin*, Hansberry uses her craft to merge her experiences and views, thus creating the type of art that she felt mattered the most, art that is inseparable from the political. The Younger's home lent itself particularly well to her craft. By focusing the play in the home, Hansberry is able to explore "what was real about the human experience under captive conditions", aptly tying these experiences to the external factors of racialised and gendered oppression (Perry 2018, 4).

## Chapter Two: Literary Analysis

In this chapter, I will examine how a feminist reading of the text is encouraged through the three key aspects that are highlighted by the female protagonists, Beneatha, Ruth and Mama: the play's functionality as a rejection of the American Dream; the importance of the domestic sphere in which the play is located; and the subversion of racialised gender roles. These three aspects emphasise the importance of the women's interaction with one another in forming the backbone of the family. When examined through a feminist lens, each one is suggestive of the inherent radicalism present in the play and demonstrates how Hansberry uses her play to reject and challenge racist and patriarchal values.

### 2.1 Rejection of the American Dream

After its Broadway debut in 1959, *A Raisin in the Sun* was initially both critiqued and celebrated for one of its most prevalent themes: the American Dream. It was positively received by many who viewed it as a play that highlighted the universality of the pursuit of this dream. They claimed that it showed how it was available to all, irrespective of any forms of oppression that existed at the time. On the other hand, it was denounced by various Black and liberal critics as being "written for whites" (Genevieve Fabre quoted in Carter 1991, 21) due to its portrayal of "a story of racism defeated through homeownership and racial integration" (Rose 2014, 29). This interpretation has been viewed by many as a gross *misinterpretation* of the play and Hansberry's socio-political message, as it ignores the racist and patriarchal values that are intrinsic to the American Dream (Carter 1991, 20). This is precisely what Hansberry demonstrates in the play through the three Younger women, whose access to this dream is distinctly shaped by both their gender and race. The audience is denied the comfort of a straightforward resolution or a happy ending. Instead, the fate of the Younger women and their dreams is left as a lingering question. Thus, Hansberry highlights the ways in which Black women's access to the supposed American Dream was limited by the dual nature of their oppression.

Mama and Ruth, for example, share the dream of home ownership. Mama discusses "all the dreams" (Hansberry 1994, 45) she had of buying a house that she could fix up, one where she could make herself a "garden like I used to see sometimes at the back of the houses down home" (53). Mama's dream of buying a home is rooted in her desire to nurture her

children, as she has dedicated her life to trying to provide the life for them that she never had. Although she and her husband, Big Walter, were unable to buy a home of their own while he was still alive, she highlights how much they wished their children could “have something – be something” (45). This wish is perhaps best encapsulated in a quote of Big Walter’s that is repeated by Mama: “Seem like God didn’t see fit to give the black man nothing but dreams – but He did give us children to make them dreams seem worth while” (46). This quote reveals the ways in which racial oppression has prevented the people of Big Walter and Mama’s generation from fulfilling their dreams. However, it also hints at the hope that their children may be granted their own dreams.

Hansberry accentuates Mama’s dream through the visual image of her potted plant that she keeps by the kitchen window sill. The “*feeble little plant growing doggedly in a small pot*” functions as a symbol for both her dreams and the love for her children (Hansberry 1994, 39, italics in original). She compares Beneatha and Walter to the “little old plant that ain’t never had enough sunshine or nothing – and look at it...” (52). Therefore the plant also functions as a symbol for how she has ensured the survival of her family through love and nurture despite the economic hardships she has faced. Mama points out how the plant is the closest she got to having a garden (53), thereby implying that for her it is a representation of these dreams. The desire to grow a garden stands in as a desire to permanently put down roots somewhere, functioning as the ultimate symbol of home.

Mama is eventually able to realise the dream of finding this home and buys a house with the insurance money. However, the prospect of their new home is clouded by uncertainty and threat. This threat is grounded in the hostility faced by African Americans who moved to all-white neighbourhoods, which presented itself in various forms of discrimination, harassment and even physical harm (Coates 2014). The implication of danger is highlighted in *Raisin* when the Youngers’ neighbour Mrs. Johnson drops by after Mama has purchased the house. Mrs. Johnson draws attention to the recent news stories that tell of “colored people that was bombed out their place” (Hansberry 1994, 100). She makes an effort to emphasise the violence experienced by Black families in those neighbourhoods by comparing Chicago to the South, claiming, “Lord, getting so you think you right down in Mississippi!” (100). She even speculates about an upcoming headline in the news, “NEGROES INVADE CLYBOURNE PARK – BOMBED!” (102). Although her intentions are not necessarily genuine, as is indicated by Hansberry’s stage notes that reveal her tone contains a “*tremendous and rather insincere sense of melodrama*” (100, italics in original), she nevertheless functions as a means to make the audience aware of the dangers that may await

the Younger family in their home. Although Mama's dream of home ownership is, in a sense, shown to be achievable, it is nevertheless tainted by this threat of violence. The sense of the uncertainty that accompanies this dream, serves as a reminder of how "freedom dreaming for Black people is fraught with risk" (Rose 2014, 30).

Beneatha's dream is also impacted by a similar sense of uncertainty that results from the ambiguous ending of the play. She is determined to go to medical school so that she can become a doctor. However, Hansberry demonstrates that Beneatha's access to this dream is unstable and subject to the socio-economic realities that are dictated by her class, gender and race. It appears to be largely due to her father's life insurance money that the dream of becoming a doctor is even possible for Beneatha. When Mama decides to give Walter the remaining sum of the insurance check, after she has put a down payment on their new home, she specifically asks that he set up a savings account for "Beneatha's medical schooling" (Hansberry 1994, 107). This money is, however, ultimately lost as Walter uses the money on an investment deal that turns sour. As a result, Beneatha grieves over her future and the dreams that were torn away from her, declaring, "while I was sleeping in that bed in there, people went out and took the future right out of my hands! And nobody asked me, nobody consulted me – they just went out and changed my life!" (134). This underpins how her dreams rested upon the insurance money, and emphasises the precarious position of her dreams, as without it she is no longer able to access them. This precariousness is highlighted even further by the fact that Beneatha does not feel as though she is fully in charge of her own dreams. By repeating that she was not asked or consulted, she points to the fact that others are able to decide whether or not she can accomplish her dreams. Asagai, one of Beneatha's suitors with whom she studies, captures this in his question, "isn't there something wrong in a house – in a world – where all dreams, good or bad, must depend on the death of a man?" (135).

Not only is the fate of the Younger family's future at Clybourne Park left unresolved, but also that of Beneatha's future. She considers accepting Asagai's marriage proposal and his invitation to move to Nigeria with him so that she could become a doctor there instead (Hansberry 1994, 149-150). Beneatha's chances of becoming a doctor, therefore, are presented as being much higher if she marries and moves to Nigeria. This is in part due to Asagai's social position, as he is presented as having greater opportunities in life due to his class. He is, for example, able to study and live abroad and has enough funds to visit his sister in Canada, therefore indicating that he is more affluent than the Youngers. In making his offer, Asagai suggests that the obstacles that have impeded Beneatha's dream, not only those

of race and gender but also class, will be removed if she leaves America for Nigeria. The implication that Beneatha can only fully realise her version of the American Dream by leaving the U.S., challenges the notion of the American Dream at its very core. It also highlights the racist and patriarchal structures that are inherent to this dream and the way in which the American Dream plays a “fundamentally exclusionary role in containing Black mobility, freedom, and self-determination” (Rose 2014, 29).

The way in which Black women were excluded from the dream is also exemplified through Ruth. The dream of home ownership is shared by her, who perhaps desires it even more desperately than Mama. Despite demonstrating an awareness of the dangers that may lie in wait in Clybourne Park, Ruth appears to be so desperate to leave their cramped home that she is willing to take the risk. Mama’s announcement that she has bought a house draws out Ruth’s most prominent display of emotion in the entire play. She is barely able to contain herself as she practically explodes from joy:

RUTH (*Struck senseless with the news, in its various degrees of goodness and trouble, she sits a moment, her fists propping her chin in thought, and then she starts to rise, bringing her fists down with vigor, the radiance spreading from cheek to cheek again*) Well – well! – All I can say is – if this is my time in life – MY TIME – to say good-bye (*And she builds with momentum as she starts to circle the room with an exuberant, almost tearfully happy release*) – to these goddamned cracking walls! – (*She pounds the walls*) – and these marching roaches! – (*She wipes at an imaginary army of marching roaches*) – and this cramped little closet which ain’t now or never was no kitchen!...then I say it loud and good, HALLELUJAH! AND GOOD-BYE MISERY...I DON’T NEVER WANT TO SEE YOUR UGLY FACE AGAIN! (*She laughs joyously, having practically destroyed the apartment, and flings her arms up and lets them come down happily, slowly, reflectively, over her abdomen, aware for the first time perhaps that the life therein pulses with happiness and not despair*). (Hansberry 1994, 94 italics in original)

Her elation at the news demonstrates how deep her desire for this dream runs, so much so that she is willing to face whatever risks may lie ahead. Her actions are also suggestive of the external factors that have perhaps shaped her dreams. The excerpt above reveals how she is only able to feel happy about her pregnancy when she is able to conceive of a different life for her unborn child. Her desire to be able to live in a home of her own, not only for herself, but for the good of her children, demonstrates how her dreams are rooted in her awareness of the reality of their situation. Her dream contrasts sharply with Walter’s ambitions to own a liquor store and become a businessman. He fantasises about a life where he “pull[s] the car up on the driveway... and the gardener will be clipping away at the hedges and he’ll say, ‘Good

evening, Mr. Younger’” (Hansberry 1994, 109). He imagines a future where his son’s education is secured, where he can turn to him and say, “Just tell me, what it is you want to be – and you’ll *be* it... You just name it, son...and I’ll hand you the world!” (109, italics in original). Although it is evident that both Ruth and Walter only want the best for their children, the juxtaposition of her realism and his fantasies underscores the different social positions they occupy due to their gender. Although Walter’s dreams are impeded by structural racism, Ruth experiences a double form of oppression as a Black woman. Walter’s dreams are indicative of the fact that his gender grants him the possibility to even dream of owning a business whereas Ruth’s stem from the need to survive from day to day. Confined to the domestic sphere due to her gender, her dreams extend only so far as her social space allows.

## **2.2. Significance of the site of the play: The domestic sphere**

The ambiguous ending of the play functions as a “deep critique of the American Dream – in particular, the pivotal role of racialised domesticity that lies at its heart” (Rose 2014, 29). This signifies the importance of the site of the play as it is set entirely in the domestic sphere, the Younger’s home, a space that has often been associated with women. This is emphasised through Mama and Ruth, for example, both of whom are socially and physically situated within the domestic sphere, in and outside of the home. They are both employed in domestic work and are often depicted as engaging in domestic tasks such as ironing (Hansberry 1994, 35-45, 76-77) household cleaning (54), and grocery shopping (97-98). By choosing to locate the play within a space that has often been associated with femaleness, Hansberry is able to subvert intersecting preconceptions. Because it is set in the “Black domestic sphere” (Rose 2014, 30), Hansberry is able to explore the deeply personal impact of structural racism and sexism to reveal the “radical political potential of space and personalities often considered compliant and complicit” (42). Domestic spaces were often rendered invisible because of their supposed inherent femaleness, and therefore the political potential of both the spaces and the women that inhabited them were largely neglected (33). In *Raisin*, Hansberry takes this space and subverts it by making it highly visible. She reveals how it is the women who form the backbone of the family, and it is through their interactions and relationships to one another that their individual strengths are revealed. The “weak, female, and less politically

important” site of the play, then, is destabilised as Hansberry uses it to display the political potential and strength of the three women (39).

Due to her position as the head of the family, Mama’s strength is perhaps the most visible of the three women. She plays a significant role in shaping the paths of the members of her family, as she strives to pass down her values. Although Mama’s traditional views may at times conflict with those of the other characters, for example those of her daughter, she is still held in a position of respect. It is particularly through her emphasis on the importance of love and dignity that she guides her family, demonstrating how the “resistive and restorative power of Black love” can transform into a “political act” in itself (Rose 2014, 43). In doing so, Mama takes charge of the space and uses it to undermine racist and sexist values.

Two of Mama’s key values are highlighted at the climax of the last act. This crucial moment takes place after Walter has lost the life insurance money and has arranged to meet with Lindner to accept the money from the Clybourne Park Improvement Association in exchange for not moving into their new home. While his family is horrified and angered that he would accept their money, Walter claims he will feel “fine” despite the toll this act will inevitably have on his sense of self (Hansberry 1994, 144). His actions, on the other hand, tell another story. Walter’s insistence that he will feel fine eventually escalates as he gets down on his knees “[g]roveling and grinning and wringing his hands” in an imitation of the racist and degrading minstrel character, Jim Crow (144, italics in original). This character was constructed and popularised by white entertainer Thomas Rice in the 1830s through his blackface minstrel shows. Rice’s Jim Crow persona created and perpetuated racist stereotypes of the “stupid, childlike, cheerful” Black labourer or servant (Kendi 2016, 170), an image that continued to be used in the entertainment industry even a hundred years after its construction. By the 1950s this character would have been familiar to both the Youngers, and the audience, as is indicated by Hansberry’s stage directions that describe Walter’s “*anguished imitation of the slow-witted movie stereotype*” (Hansberry 1994, 144, italics in original). As Walter takes on the role of this character, the Younger women look on in “*frozen horror*” as they witness the total deterioration of his sense of self-worth (144, italics in original).

Walter’s actions exemplify how he has internalised the racist ideology of the society that surrounds him and reveal the effects of structural racism on the individual. Hansberry connects the external, public forces to the personal by revealing their harmful impact within a private space, the home. Significantly, it is through Mama’s strength that she is able to challenge these structures. When Beneatha reminds Mama that she was taught to “despise any man” who would get down on their knees (Hansberry 1994, 145). Mama agrees with



Beneatha, stating, “Yes – I taught you that...But I thought I taught you something else too...I thought I taught you to love him” (145). It is through lessons like these, about the importance of self-love and self-respect, that Mama turns their home into “a crucial locus for the development and nurturance of political possibility” (Rose 2014, 32).

This is a key element of Tricia Rose’s concept of the politics of what she calls “(inter)personal justice” (2014, 31). She explains how the politics of (inter)personal justice highlights the pivotal “role of intimate relationships and community formations in producing or suffocating social justice movements or other forms of radical resistance” (33). Building on the crucial connection between personal relationships and political movements, she posits that examining Black domestic spaces can reveal “the impact of structural forms of inequality on interpersonal dynamics” and the consequences this may have on the struggle against oppression (33). Mama not only demonstrates her strength through her love and pride, but serves as a signifier for the generations who participated in this struggle. She reminds her family of the “five generations of people who was slaves and sharecroppers” from whom she is descended (Hansberry 1994, 143). She laments over the values that have changed over time, claiming that “[o]nce upon a time freedom used to be life – now it’s money. I guess the world really do change” (74). She tells Walter about her own past, revealing how “[i]n my time we was worried about not being lynched and getting to the North if we could and how to stay alive and still have a pinch of dignity too” (75). These reminders, spoken within the intimacy of the home, draw in the socio-political realities of the world outside and thus reveal the way in which politics are inherent to the domestic sphere rather than separate from it.

It is also through the character of Beneatha that the political realm is brought into the domestic sphere. As a character who is passionate about social justice, she loudly voices her perspectives on critical issues of the time such as feminist thought, Black nationalism, and Black pride. Some of these perspectives are particularly interesting because they highlight how aspects of Hansberry’s own politics were before their time, such as Beneatha’s vibrant celebration of Black pride. Beneatha searches for her identity by discovering more about her heritage (Hansberry 1994, 62), chooses to wear her hair naturally (80), and celebrates her African roots by dressing in traditional Nigerian robes (61, 76-81). These are all reminiscent of the ‘Black is beautiful’ movement that surged in the sixties and seventies across the global African diaspora, particularly amongst women. This movement served as a vital tool for self-definition for Black women. It encouraged racial pride and what Tanisha C. Ford calls the “re-aesthetisation of blackness” (2015, 7), or, redefining blackness by eradicating “negative stereotypes linked to black bodies” (6) and replacing these with “new ‘body narratives’” (7).

Fashion and beauty became politically charged, and black women in particular were able to redefine these body narratives by adopting what was known as “soul style” (1). Soul style included wearing “African-inspired clothing...large hoop earrings and sporting Afros and cornrow braids” (4). Beneatha’s hair and clothing are reflective of this soul style, even before its time. She embodies the idea behind this movement in her declaration of self-pride, boldly using her style choices as a means to redefine *her* body narrative. It is through this declaration that Hansberry challenges racist and patriarchal values, as Beneatha expresses her self-worth in a world that is structured to oppress her due to her gender *and* race. By reframing a political act within a domestic setting, Hansberry creates a direct link between the crucial socio-political issues often relegated to the public sphere and the more intimate sphere of the home. This “invites our attention to a multiplicity of oppressions” that exist both in the public and intimate spheres (Rose 2014, 48).

Out of the three female protagonists, Ruth is perhaps the most deeply rooted within the intimate, domestic sphere. She is often occupied with household tasks such as cooking (Hansberry 1994, 26-27), ironing (35-45, 76-77), and packing before their move (110). Her role as a mother often transcends the relationship she has with her son, taking on an additional role as the caregiver for the whole family. This is demonstrated through both her physical actions and the emotional support she lends to the other characters. She is the first to rise in the morning and takes responsibility for ensuring that daily routines are followed, waking, feeding and sending off both Travis and Walter. Her extended caregiving towards Walter, for example, is often manifested physically through food, even to the extent that he complains “[w]hy you always trying to give me something to eat?” (88). She lends her support to the other women, listening to their worries and concerns, and often is placed in the position between their conflicting perspectives. Mama and Beneatha’s disagreement about religion is, in fact, mediated by Ruth. When Beneatha insists that she is “just tired of hearing about God all the time” (50) and “God is just one idea I don’t accept” (51) despite Mama’s warnings, Mama eventually loses her patience and slaps her face. She demands that Beneatha repeat the phrase “[i]n my mother’s house there is still God” (51). Ruth helps to smooth over the conflict, telling Beneatha, “What you did was childish – so you got treated like a child” (52). It is important to note that she says this to her kindly, “*gently, with profound understanding*” as she uses her compassion and understanding to try to resolve the issue (52, italics in original). After Beneatha has left for class, Ruth tells Mama that Beneatha “said she was sorry” despite this being untrue (52). She listens to Mama’s fears about the future of her children and attempts to soothe her concerns, telling her, “[n]ow...you taking it all too

seriously. You just got strong-willed children and it takes a strong woman like you to keep ‘em in hand” (52). In doing so, Ruth is placed in a position where she navigates between the conflicting perspectives of the women and attempts to resolve their tensions. The fact that she is able to do so with honesty, without taking sides and by offering comfort indicates that she is capable of providing this support without giving up her own agency.

If these three women together form the backbone of the Younger family, Ruth acts as the glue that holds this backbone together by securing the bond between the women. This is the type of bond that is formed on the “basis of shared strengths and resources” rather than “on the basis of shared victimization” (hooks 2014, 46). The bond shared by the Younger women is the kind that bell hooks describes as the “essence of Sisterhood” (46) or the “expression of political solidarity” between women (44). In lending one another support, despite their generational and religious differences, Ruth and the other woman form a Sisterhood and foster a “communit[y] of resistance” (hooks 2015, 122). According to hooks, these types of communities are created by Black women and serve as spaces where “black people could retain our sense of wholeness and integrity” (121). They emerge from attempts to achieve social change as a community and help to deepen the bond between women as they “grow closer in struggle” (122). The Younger women help to form a community of resistance by collectively using their shared home as a space where conflict can erupt and perspectives can clash. Yet, simultaneously it is also one where dreams can be shared, tensions resolved, and respect and love are nurtured and sustained. Together they cultivate a secure space that encourages the sense of wholeness and integrity that hooks describes. Because their home exists as a site where disagreements can transform into interaction, Hansberry “articulates a politics of (inter)personal justice that reframes the family – the Black family”, in part by hinting at the political potential of the domestic sphere (Rose 2014, 33). In *Raisin*, the domestic sphere serves as a space where women foster an environment that allows for both respect and conflict to occur. As Rose argues, it is in these types of intimate and private spaces that political consciousness can be allowed to develop (33). Therefore, Hansberry subverts this space and reclaims the domestic sphere as a site of political, and (inter)personal, potential.

### **2.3 Subversion of racialised stereotypes, gender roles and “controlling images”**

In *Raisin*, Hansberry also uses the individual strengths of the female protagonists to subvert the racialised gender roles and stereotypical images that have often been attributed to Black

women as a means of asserting power. Those in positions of power frequently utilize negative stereotypes and “controlling images” in order to perpetuate the dominance of those they wish to oppress (Hill Collins 2002, 69). When certain gender roles are ascribed to African American women, these roles are inevitably racialised due to the “unique matrix of domination characterised by intersecting oppression” (23). The stereotypes that are constructed stem from this intersection located at the crux of their oppression, and serve a highly specific purpose: that of justification and legitimisation. Constructing damaging images of African American women helps to normalise structural racism and sexism by providing a justification for the racial, sexual and economic exploitation of them. It encourages a binary mode of thinking where people are placed into categories based on “oppositional difference”, where the inherent difference between two groups is defined according to this opposition (Hill Collins 2002, 70). The objectification of those who are Othered by the dominant group is often the result of binary thinking and presents itself through the use of harmful stereotype. Hansberry actively challenges stereotypes of racialised gender roles through the attitudes and actions of the Beneatha, Ruth and Mama.

Due to her outspoken nature and opinions, which were arguably ahead of their time, Hansberry’s depiction of the character of Beneatha is perhaps Hansberry’s clearest challenge to racialised gender roles. Beneatha refuses to adhere to the societal expectations of women in the 1950s, choosing instead to prioritise her education over marriage. Her opinions are clear from the beginning of the play as she states frankly, “Listen, I’m going to be a doctor. I’m not worried about who I’m going to marry yet—if I ever get married” (Hansberry 1994, 50). This is a goal that remains unchanged by the end of the play, when she contemplates moving to Africa to pursue her dream there instead. The suggestion that the character of Beneatha may be based on Hansberry herself further indicates how the character may have been shaped to resist gendered expectations. Beneatha’s interest in African American and racial politics reflects Hansberry’s own political beliefs. In a 1959 interview with Studs Terkel, Hansberry responds to his question over whether there was an autobiographical element in the construction of Beneatha. She claims that “it’s an expression of conceit, really, because the truth of the matter is that I enjoyed making fun of this girl, who is myself eight years ago...because I have that kind of confidence about what she represents” (Hansberry 1959). Hansberry draws a direct link between her own views and those of Beneatha. Her use of the phrase “an expression of conceit” indicates that Hansberry used herself as inspiration for the character. However, she also highlights how some of Beneatha’s opinions may require some maturity and experience, by claiming that she used the character to make fun of the person

she was eight years ago. Hansberry goes on further to say that Beneatha “doesn’t have a word in the play that I don’t agree with still today”, therefore strengthening the idea that Beneatha’s opinions are rooted in those of Hansberry’s own (Hansberry 1959).

Beneatha’s decisions and statements are contrasted with the expectations of the time, which are voiced through other characters. Walter, for example, reveals his opinion of her decision to become a doctor rather than marry. He refers to her dreams as “silly ideas” she should rid herself of so that she can marry “a man with some loot” instead (Hansberry 1994, 150). He highlights the rarity of such dreams for a woman, stating, “Ain’t many girls who decide...to be a doctor” (36), and suggests that she “go be a nurse like other women – or just get married and be quiet” (38). By limiting Beneatha’s options to nurse or wife, Walter exposes his opinion of the type of position he believes women can, and should, occupy. In telling her to ‘be quiet’, he suggests her dreams should be silenced and sacrificed in pursuit of what he views as more appropriate vocations for a woman. However, Walter is not the only one who questions Beneatha’s attitude towards marriage. Even Mama and Ruth display their disbelief at Beneatha’s declaration of “if I ever get married”, responding only with a shocked “*If!*” (50, italics in original).

George Murchison, an affluent suitor of Beneatha’s and her fellow student, is perhaps the most crude in his delivery of societal expectations. After an evening out, George attempts to get physically intimate with Beneatha, who is more interested in talking. He eventually becomes frustrated with her insistence on pursuing a conversation, which is indicated through both the stage direction and his speech. He exasperatedly tells her, “You’re a nice-looking girl...all over. That’s all you need, honey, forget the atmosphere. Guys aren’t going to go for the atmosphere—they’re going to go for what they see. Be glad for that” (Hansberry 1994, 96). George’s statement is indicative of the types of roles women were expected to occupy, ones where they are subjected to condescension and objectification. Because “domination always involves attempts to objectify the subordinate group”, this objectification is a necessary tool of dominant patriarchy (Hill Collins 2002, 71). By reducing Beneatha to her appearance, George gives voice to the patriarchal power structures that divest women of their intellectual, and political, worth. In Beneatha’s case, her appearance is both gendered and racialised as a result of the intersecting oppressions that she experiences as a Black woman.

This intersected objectification is given voice, not through George, but through Walter, who comments on the physical appearance of both his wife and sister. His statements are gendered and racialised, exemplifying white supremacist depictions of Black women that serve to perpetuate oppression. In an exchange with Ruth, Walter highlights both her race and

gender when he discusses the way she looks. He is able to carry out his objectification of her because “part of the objectification of all women lies in evaluating how they look” (Hill Collins 2002, 89). He wonders at how young she looks while making his eggs only to then claim, “[i]t’s gone now – you look like yourself again!” when she is indifferent to his comments (Hansberry 1994, 27). This, on its own, could be interpreted as an attempt at a joke, a humorous morning ritual between husband and wife. However, Walter’s comments become a part of a process of objectification rooted in racial and sexual oppression when he follows the comment by stating, “First thing a man ought to learn in life is not to make love to no colored woman first thing in the morning. You all some eeeevil people at eight o’clock in the morning.” (27). By referring to her as ‘you all’, he places her in a binary category separate from himself, emphasising their oppositional difference. His direct reference to Ruth as a ‘colored woman’ locates her gender and race within his evaluation of her appearance.

This is further underlined in Walter’s interaction with Beneatha, who is also objectified by him through a similar strategy. After announcing that she is a “horrible-looking chick at this hour”, he once again employs a binary mode of thinking by claiming that both Ruth and Beneatha belong to “the world’s most backward race of people” (Hansberry 1994, 38). This rhetoric is repeated by Walter as he claims to belong to a “group of men tied to a race of women with small minds” (35). He sets up a clear dichotomy, claiming that he, like other Black men, is “all tied up in a race of people that don’t know how to do nothing but moan, pray and have babies” (87). By categorising Ruth and Beneatha as a race separate from himself, Walter places them in a position where he feels authorised to objectify, and therefore attempt to subjugate, them. It is through Walter’s speech that the racist and patriarchal values of the dominant power structures seep through, values that he appears to have internalised. Bell hooks discusses the challenges of growing up in a white supremacist society, surrounded by those who are “everywhere every day of our lives urging us to hate blackness and ourselves” (2015, 59). Walter’s comments reveal this internalisation in that they echo the narratives found in the controlling images constructed by the dominant group.

These encounters between Beneatha, Ruth and Walter exemplify the way in which African American women must come face-to-face with the dominant ideology “through a range of unquestioned daily experiences” (Hill Collins 2002, 89). The focus on their appearance serves as an example of how these images serve to degrade Black women as they must encounter “prevailing standards of beauty...used by White men, White women, Black men” (90), specifically those that relate to “skin color, facial features, and hair texture” (89). Hansberry subverts these standards and the ‘controlling images’ dictated by this ideology, as

both Beneatha and Ruth resist Walter's objectification of them. Beneatha's decision to cut her hair and wear it naturally symbolises her resistance against what Hill Collins refers to as "the binary thinking that underpins intersecting oppressions" where "blue-eyed, blond, thin White women could not be considered beautiful without the Other – Black women with...dark skin, broad noses, full lips, and kinky hair" (89). According to some scholars, the way in which Black women choose to style their hair has long been a political one, as it is one of the first ways in which black women's identity is impacted by White supremacist values (hooks 2014, 62; Ford 2015, 16-17). Hooks' question "[h]ow is it that little black girls learn (even before we know anything about racism) that our hair is a problem?" reveals how these values are embedded already from a young age (2015, 63). She claims that natural hairstyles can function as an "expression of self-worth and self-care...in a society that does not affirm our beauty" (64-65). Hansberry uses Beneatha's hair to demonstrate how expressions of self-worth, self-love and pride can be vital in resisting the racist and sexist notions of beauty that exist as a means to further dehumanise Black women. Beneatha's act of resistance appears even more radical given the period of time during which the play was written. Although some Black women had worn their hair naturally for decades, it wasn't until the 'Black is Beautiful' movement of the sixties and seventies that natural hairstyles, such as the afro, were largely popularised. In including this key act, Hansberry is able to utilise what would later become a popular, visual act of resistance before its time. This not only highlights the boldness of Beneatha's actions but also is suggestive of Hansberry's own boldness and political views.

Through Beneatha, Hansberry visually challenges the racialised and sexist images that Walter gives voice to in his objectifications. Like her, Ruth also attempts to resist objectification. She does so using both her frankness and dry humour as tools to disengage from his discourse. She initially responds to his evaluations of her appearance with indifference, but becomes more direct in the statement, "[m]an, if you don't shut up and leave me alone" (Hansberry 1994, 27). Her directness demonstrates her refusal to allow Walter's perpetuation of white patriarchal values to permeate her psyche, to a certain extent.

It is also indicative of her practical approach to life. Throughout the play, Ruth's behaviour reveals an insistence on the pragmatic rather than on the idealistic. This focus on the realistic aspects of the Younger's daily life is another way in which Hansberry subverts racialised gender roles. Ruth's practical realism contrasts with Walter's emotional idealism, revealing another binary often constructed to place men and women in opposition to one another. This is one in which dichotomies are constructed based on sex and the traits with which they are stereotypically associated. In these dichotomies, 'man' and 'masculine' are

often set up as being the opposite of ‘woman’ and ‘feminine’. In a similar vein, ‘reason’ is associated with the notion of the ‘masculine’ and is therefore constructed as the opposite of ‘emotion’.

Hansberry’s portrayal of these characters subverts these traditional gender stereotypes, a subversion which functions to challenge racial and patriarchal power structures. Ruth’s ability to face the reality of their situation and focus on the daily survival of the family serves as a powerful means of resistance to these structures. She does so by living her truth openly and honestly rather than constructing false or idealised versions of her reality. Scholar bell hooks discusses the way in which the dominant group has implemented a “culture of domination...where lying is an acceptable social norm” (hooks 2014, 11). Rather than perpetuate this culture, Ruth chooses not to shy away from the truth. Hooks posits that the “structures of deceit” purveyed by White supremacy to disseminate negative stereotypes of Black inferiority had a direct impact on Black communities. Forced to use deceit as a survival mechanism, “strategies of dissimulation” (hooks 2014, 13-14) found their way into Black interpersonal relationships, resulting in communities where “illusions are valued more than reality” (15). Ruth has no illusions about her reality, as is indicated by her use of dry humour and direct honesty throughout the play. She very frankly expresses the dire need for the family to move away from the small, cramped apartment, or as she refers to it – the “rat trap”, in which they live (Hansberry 1994, 44), exclaiming that she is even willing to “work twenty hours a day in all the kitchens in Chicago...scrub all the floors in America” if it means they can “get OUT OF HERE!!” (140). While Walter’s dreams lie in the illusions of wealth, Ruth displays an understanding that if they are to improve their lives, they must all work to get there. In her response to Walter’s discussion of his liquor store, Ruth uses her sarcasm as a means to assert her practical realism. For example, by telling him, “So you would rather *be* Mr. Arnold than be his chauffeur. So—I would *rather* be living in Buckingham Palace” (34, italics in original), she highlights the impracticality and illusory nature of his approach to concretising his dreams. Her sarcasm is, however, also undermined to a certain extent by Walter’s behaviour. Rather than being dismissed by her sarcasm, Walter grows more insistent in response to her realism. The fact that he resists her more forcefully when she attempts to assert herself is perhaps revealing of the gendered power structures underlying their relationship.

Despite this, Ruth continues to use direct honesty to express the reality of their situation. When discussing their relationship and family, Ruth, gently but directly, points out to Walter how “life don’t have to be like this. I mean sometimes people can do things, so that



things are better” (Hansberry 1994, 89). In doing so she places an emphasis on *doing* rather than on only fantasising, revealing not only her pragmatic nature but also her ability to face reality. Her commitment to being frank and honest about her reality functions as a means for her to resist the overlying sexist and racist structures of deceit. To hooks, this type of commitment serves as a “mark of our resistance, when we claim the right to speak the truth of our reality”, especially when “it remains a mark of our oppression that as black people we cannot be dedicated to truth in our lives” (2014, 16). Through her honesty, Ruth demonstrates that she has the tools and the strength to reject both Walter and the dominant society’s objectification of her, although she is perhaps not always consciously aware of doing so.

Stereotypes linked to physical appearance and beauty ideals were not the only images produced by racist patriarchal ideology. The dominant group also constructed negative images of Black motherhood as justifications for racial and socioeconomic oppression. Patricia Hill Collins describes three categories into which Black mothers were placed: The Mammy, The Matriarch, and The Welfare Mother. The first two of these categories were images that existed before and during the release of *Raisin*, and thus Hansberry’s portrayal of mothers in her play arguably serves as a counterpoint to these racialised, gendered images. Originating from the era of slavery, the Mammy stereotype advanced the image of the Black mother as a “faithful, obedient domestic servant” who has “accepted her subordination” (Hill Collins 2002, 72-73), thus functioning as justification for economic exploitation. By superimposing this image onto Black women, those in power determined the “ideal Black female relationship to elite White male power” in which the Black woman is subservient to the white man (Hill Collins 2002, 72). They aimed to perpetuate these power structures through Black mothers who would, supposedly, impart their obedience to their children and become tools for racial oppression themselves. The Mammy image later evolved into the stereotype of the Matriarch, which became a “full-blown racialised image in the 1960s” (75).

If the Mammy was constructed as the ‘ideal’ Black mother in the white home, the Matriarch was the archetype of the “‘bad’ Black mother” in the Black home (Hill Collins 2002, 75). The high number of households run by single mothers in Black communities in the beginning of the twentieth century resulted in the dissemination of a narrative of dysfunction. This was a narrative that became increasingly prevalent in mid-twentieth century sociological and political discourse, both before and after *Raisin* in the works of sociologists such as Gunnar Myrdal and Daniel P. Moynihan (Rose 2014, 32). The Matriarch stereotype was not only used for justifying racist economic exploitation, but was also utilised as a socio-political strategy to distract from the actual structural policies that perpetuated racial oppression. By

labelling Black families who were headed by women as ‘dysfunctional’, the dominant group was able to use them as examples of supposed cultural inferiority. Families such as the Younger family, who are matriarchal and multi-generational, were Othered because they did not fit the image of the ‘model’ family: the nuclear, patriarchal family.

Because they deviated from the norms dictated by White patriarchy, the stereotype of the Matriarch was used to demonise Black, single mothers. In the stereotype, the Matriarch is depicted as an emasculating, overtly and inherently “unfeminine” aggressive figure, who subverts White patriarchal ideals of motherhood by operating as “dangerous, deviant, castrating mothers” (Hill Collins 2002, 77). In *Raisin*, Hansberry challenges these stereotypes, particularly that of the Matriarch. Although Ruth is not the ‘head’ of the family, her assertiveness in her relationship with Walter could, according to white patriarchal values, be categorised as a “failure to model appropriate gender behaviour” (Hill Collins 2002, 76). As Walter describes his plans to open his liquor business, Ruth first attempts to disengage from the conversation, as she is clearly tired of hearing the same thing “every day, every night and every morning” (Hansberry 1994, 34). Yet Walter persists, getting increasingly agitated by her initial disinterest and subsequent disapproval. Rather than become involved in the conversation, Ruth tells Walter “[e]at your eggs” (33, 34). Walter is incensed by her dismissal, slamming his fists on the table shouting “DAMN MY EGGS – DAMN ALL THE EGGS THAT EVER WAS!” (34). Walter’s responses to Ruth’s firm insistence that he eat his eggs and go to work are used as a tool to voice the values of white patriarchy (Hansberry 1994, 33-38). In response, Ruth simply instructs him to “go to work”, which further infuriates Walter, who responds with a rhetoric that genders and racialises Ruth: he claims that a “man needs for a woman to back him up” (34). He even goes so far as to blame *Black* women for his position in life, declaring, “[t]hat is just what is wrong with the colored woman in this world...Don’t understand about building their men up and making ‘em feel like they somebody. Like they can do something” (34). His insistence on Ruth having to ‘back him up’ and ‘build him up’ implies that her behaviour does the very opposite. It suggests that she drags him down, emasculates him. Hansberry subverts this image by demonstrating Ruth’s strength through her realism and her role as mediator.

The stereotype of the emasculating Matriarch has perhaps most frequently been ascribed to the character of Mama. Several critics of the play have placed Mama securely within this category, choosing to view the last, and most critical, choices Walter makes in the play as a final act of submission to her will (Rose 2014, 39). Hansberry subverts the racialised archetype of the Matriarch by demonstrating how, rather than emasculation, Mama utilises

what Tricia Rose describes as “politically conditioned love” to guide rather than dominate (2014, 37, italics in original). Rose discerns between “politically conditional” and “politically conditioned” love (37, italics in original). The former refers to love that has been corroded by the politics of structural oppression, which seep into interpersonal dynamics and can manifest itself through “rage, nihilism, and the internalization of self-hatred” (33). The latter, on the other hand, refers to a love that is both compassionate and critical. Because it “connects interpersonal healing to larger social contexts, but does not allow those contexts to justify all responses to it”, it is a love that is affirmative but which also demands accountability (37). Walter’s critical choice to reject the money offered by the Clybourne Park Improvement Association is demonstrative of the way in which love becomes a “resistive act” (36). This act is carried out by Mama. She reminds Beneatha that “[t]here is *always* something left to love” (Hansberry 1994, 145, italics in original) when she has rejected Walter as a “toothless rat” (144) who is “no brother of mine” (145). She emphasises that the time to love someone the most is when “he’s at his lowest and can’t believe in hisself ‘cause the world done whipped him so!” (145). The power of this type of love and its critical role in “collective survival” (Rose 2014, 36) is emphasised when Mama reminds her children of where they came from:

I come from five generations of people who was slaves and sharecroppers – but ain’t nobody in my family never let nobody pay ’em no money that was a way of telling us we wasn’t fit to walk the earth. We ain’t never been that poor... We ain’t never been that – dead inside.” (Hansberry 1994, 143)

Her powerful words highlight the long legacy of this collective survival. By declaring that their family has “never been that poor...that – dead inside”, Mama makes a clear distinction between material and spiritual wealth (Hansberry 1994, 143). She reminds her children that no matter how poor they may be financially, there is still power in self-pride, compassion and love. A life without these, according to her, is the equivalent of death or at least a spiritual death. In fact, Mama uses love to heal the relationship between the siblings and enable the sustainable survival of her family. This is the very opposite of the alleged dysfunction that is ascribed to Black matriarchal families. The stereotype of both the Mammy and the Matriarch are subverted simultaneously. Using her strength and love to navigate between her children, Mama attempts to resolve the conflict between them and guide them towards a direction where they are empowered. This is the opposite of dysfunction, and Mama ensures the healing and therefore endurance of the Youngers. In doing so, she rejects the expectations of the Mammy as she does not teach them their “assigned place in White power structures” but how to survive despite the persistence of these structures (Hill Collins 2002, 73). Mama’s

subversion of these stereotypes highlights the “untenable position” of Black women who “encounter pressures to be submissive mammies in one setting, then are stigmatised again as matriarchs for being strong figures in their own homes” (78). In her interview with Studs Terkel, Hansberry highlights the intersectional oppression that Black women experience, stating:

[O]bviously, the most oppressed group of any oppressed group will be its women, you know? Obviously. Since women, period, are oppressed in society and if you’ve got an oppressed group they’re twice oppressed. So I should imagine that they react accordingly. (Hansberry 1959)

In *Raisin*, all three women ‘react accordingly’ to resist racialised gender roles and stereotypes. Beneatha resists societal expectations by asserting her agency through her behaviour and image. Ruth uses her realism to resist Walter’s internalisations of white patriarchal values and stereotypes of ‘bad’ motherhood. Mama’s perseverance, strength and belief in the affirmative power of politically conditioned love demonstrates the way in which Black matriarchs have “become the backbone of our people in a very necessary way” (Hansberry 1959).

### Chapter Three: *Raisin* On Screen

It was not long after *Raisin* premiered on Broadway in 1959 that one of the play's producers, David Susskind, wrote to Sam Briskin, the Vice-President of Columbia Pictures at the time, to generate interest in a film adaptation. By the autumn of 1959, Columbia Pictures had bought the rights to the film. Despite Hansberry's initial reluctance to see her play adapted to the screen, she used the opportunity to expand her depiction of the Younger family through her screenplay (Perry 2018, 114-113). Directed by Daniel Petrie, the film, starring most of the Broadway production's original cast, was released in 1961 to critical success. At the 1961 Cannes Film Festival, it was nominated for the prestigious Palm d'Or, and was bestowed the Gary Cooper Award for 'human values' (Ingle 2009, 190). Actors Sydney Poitier and Claudia McNeil, who played Walter Lee and Lena Younger, received Golden Globe nominations for their performances. Ruby Dee was awarded the National Board of Review award for her performance as Ruth Younger (190). Despite receiving a nomination from the Screen Actors Guild Award for Best Screenplay for the final filmed version, the 1961 film has garnered criticism for its political ambivalence. Cuts made by studio executives to Hansberry's original screenplay resulted in a film that had been primed for a white audience (Wilkerson quoted in Hansberry 1992, xxxvi). The cut scenes included what Columbia Pictures executives described as "excess race issue material", an indication not only of their conservatism, but also of the level of control held by Hollywood institutions (Lipari 2004, 83).

Since then, two other adaptations have made their way to the screen. The first of these was released almost thirty years later, in 1989, by PBS as a part of their American Playhouse television series. The television adaptation was directed by Bill Duke and starred Danny Glover and Esther Rolle, as Walter Lee and Lena Younger. This adaptation stayed true to the play's original script, and includes scenes that were previously cut from both the Broadway and 1961 film productions of *Raisin* (Hansberry 1994, 12). This version was described by Robert Nemiroff, Hansberry's former husband and executive producer of the production, as "a luminous embodiment of the stage play as reconceived, but not altered, for the camera", as opposed to its "drastically cut and largely one-dimensional" cinematic predecessor (12). Like its predecessor, however, the 1989 production also received critical acclaim and was nominated for three Emmy Awards. The third, and the most recent, screen adaptation was the 2008 production based on director Kenny Leon's 2004 award-winning Broadway revival of the play. The film retained its original Broadway cast, starring Sean Combs, Phylicia Rashad, Audra McDonald, and Sanaa Lahan, as Walter Lee, Lena, Ruth and Beneatha Younger

respectively. Both Rashad and McDonald received Emmy nominations for their performances in the made-for-television film produced by ABC. This latest version differs from the Petrie and Duke productions in that it was adapted from the stage play into a teleplay written by Paris Qualles (Harvey 2008). This departure from *Raisin*, the stage play, allowed the film some creativity in combining elements from previous adaptations, even restoring to some extent the cut scenes from the 1961 cinematic version.

Spanning a total of almost four decades, these adaptations speak to the persisting relevance of Hansberry's work. They also provide an opportunity to assess how the themes highlighted in this thesis have been reimagined and interpreted across starkly different temporal and cultural contexts. Examining the ways in which the female characters have been represented in a visual medium offers insights into whether the feminist perspective present in *Raisin* has been sustained or overlooked.

### **3.1 'Translating' *Raisin* in Hollywood: The implications of studio control in the 1960s**

Daniel Petrie's 1961 film rode the tide of the Broadway play's success and was released in the midst of the civil rights movement. However, the 1992 publication of Hansberry's original screenplay for the film revealed the extent to which studio executives shaped the racial discourse in the film. The cuts made to the original screenplay are indicative of the structures of institutional racism at work in Hollywood at the time. It is precisely because of these cuts that Lisbeth Lipari refers to the film as a "translation", due to the nature of translation as a "rhetorical act that privileges certain choices and interests" (83). Petrie's film is an example of this type of rhetorical act. Although it was one of the first Hollywood films to depict an African American family with "dignity, humanity, and complexity", the more radical, political and feminist themes of the play were nevertheless muted (Lipari 2004, 97). The film remained subject to the institutions that produced "racial(ized) cultural constructions" and disseminated these through popular culture (83). For the majority of their history, these institutions retained strict control over the representation of marginalised groups, a practice that accounts for the racist traditions of minstrelsy, Black exoticism, and the "violent erasure of black womanhood" in cinema (hooks 1992, 119). This erasure underscores how film and television serve as powerful tools for propagating the values of the dominant culture. The visual nature of these mediums led to the extension of the gaze as a means of asserting control, repression and negation. Those in power have historically dominated the gaze by

dictating who gets to use it and towards whom it is allowed to be directed. After all, as bell hooks states, “[t]here is power in looking” (1992, 115). The new scenes Hansberry originally included in her screenplay imply the desire to subvert the power structures inherent in this gaze by restoring what she felt was missing from Hollywood – “reality” (1992, xliii).

Unfortunately, however, her vision was for the most part denied. The removal of these scenes resulted in representations of the Younger women that for the most part maintained racialised and gendered repression.

In the 1959 play, one of the ways in which Hansberry challenges racialised gender roles is through the character of Beneatha. In the play, she is outspoken about her political views and resists conforming to societal expectations through both these views and her image. This is carried out to some extent in Petrie’s film. As is the case in the play, Beneatha is clear about her intentions to prioritise her education over marriage and become a doctor. Her clothing and actions are contrasted with those of Mama and Ruth. She wears slacks and oversized men’s shirts in addition to dresses and skirts. While Ruth is often shown carrying out domestic tasks such as ironing and folding laundry, Beneatha’s actions emphasise her resistance to gender roles. In the scene where Ruth and Beneatha are packing, for example, it is Beneatha, rather than Ruth, who is hammering the crates shut. The hammer is imbued with more significance when Karl Lindner, from the Clybourne Park Improvement Association arrives. Beneatha is the first to realise the true nature of Lindner’s intentions, and picks up the hammer as he begins to describe what it is that the association does. She continues to hold the tool in her hands until Lindner is told by Walter to get out. Significantly, she is the one to open the door for Lindner, and proceeds to continue her hammering once he leaves. Placing a tool, stereotypically associated with masculinity, into her hands during this pivotal scene suggest Beneatha’s inclination towards resisting traditional gender roles. This is offset, however, by the removal of key scenes in the play and screenplay that highlight Beneatha’s ability to challenge objectification and reveal her political potential. In the play, Beneatha resists George Murchison and Walter Lee’s objectification of her by cutting her hair and wearing it naturally. Hansberry is able to use this radical and political act as a challenge against patriarchal and racist values. This scene was cut from the final film, and Hansberry’s radical expression of Black female pride removed with it. Beneatha’s exploration of her identity and intellectualism is further diminished through the removal of the crucial scene that takes place between her and Asagai at the end of the play. In the film, this scene is cut short. There is a notable absence of Beneatha and Asagai’s discussion of anti-colonialist and pan-Africanist issues in the film, exemplifying how the “intellectual dimensions of Beneatha and

Asagai are trivialized” (Wilkerson 1986, 451). This trivialisation is accentuated by using a “saccharine” musical score in scenes that take place between Beneatha and Asagai (Lipari 2004, 95). In their abridged final scene together, the “strings swell in romantic, cresting waves”, belittling the struggle over “normative gender and cultural politics” that takes place between the two characters throughout the play (95). Additionally, the condensed scene results in the significance of Beneatha’s dreams being lost. Instead of explaining why she wants to become a doctor, Beneatha simply states “[i]t takes money to become a doctor” (Petrie 1961). The gendered and racialised obstacles to Beneatha’s dream, highlighted in the play, are instead reframed as a class issue.

This is not the only example in the film where racial codes are removed. Walter’s references to Ruth and Beneatha as ‘coloured women’ are, for the most part, changed to “women” (Petrie 1961). The implication of this is significant as it erases the intersecting oppressions that Black women face due to their gender and race. It removes the specific form of racialised sexism that they experience. One of the ways in which this racialised sexism is enforced is through objectification. In the play, Ruth resists Walter’s objectification of her through her practical realism and sarcasm. The role she plays in taking care of the family and home is diminished through the film’s framing of Walter as the protagonist. The film begins with a close up shot of Walter’s face as the alarm goes off. It is only after this that the focus shifts to Ruth and the responsibilities she undertakes in ensuring that daily routines are followed. This reframing is emphasised through the interactions that take place between Ruth and Walter in which Ruth is positioned as more submissive. This takes place largely through the use of the camera angles and framing. When Walter claims that all that Ruth can say in response to his dreams is “eat your eggs”, the scene is shot with Ruth’s back to the camera (Petrie 1961). Ruth is then entirely absent from the frame when Walter states that women should make “men feel like they can do something” (Petrie 1961). Her desperation to leave their home and pursue her dream of home ownership is similarly lessened. When Mama tells Ruth and Walter of the down payment she has placed on the house in Clybourne Park, Ruth’s reaction is muted. Instead, the camera focuses on Walter and his reaction to Mama’s news. He is in the foreground of the shot, while Mama and Ruth sit in the background. The audience is then positioned to witness and focus on what Walter has lost rather than on what Ruth has gained from Mama’s decision. In doing so, Ruth is robbed of the sense of agency and strength she has in the stage play.

This is further emphasised through the *mise-en-scène* of the film. The final setting obstructs the visual exploration of the inherently intimate impact of the structures of



patriarchal racism. The cramped conditions and weariness of the Younger's apartment is replaced in the film with a setting that is bright and spacious. This is highlighted through Ruth's actions as she walks "from window to window opening the shades and bringing in radiant sunshine" (Lipari 2004, 95). The setting of the film does not depict the often derelict and overcrowded conditions of South Side housing at the time and is in direct contrast with Hansberry's screen directions. In these directions, she describes a panning shot that begins outside of the Younger's apartment building and moves in through a "TINY (I REPEAT T-I-N-Y) WINDOW" into their home (Hansberry 1992, 4). It is evident then, that the emphasis she placed on the small size of the window was entirely ignored. Furthermore, the close up shot of Walter's face also contradicted Hansberry's original intentions for the opening of the film. Her original screenplay demonstrates the intention to firmly establish that "[t]his is the ghetto of Chicago" by using panning shots of Chicago's South Side with lines from Hughes' poem superimposed over them (5). Both the panning shots and Hughes' text were cut, therefore removing important contextual cues in which the play takes place. The decision of studio executives to remove these cues led to mixed reviews at the Cannes film festival. Petrie described how foreign audiences became restless because they "didn't see what they [the Younger family] had to complain about" (Petrie quoted in Lipari 2004, 95). By omitting the exploration of the poor living conditions of the Younger family, and of other South Side Chicago residents, the audience is denied the chance to understand Ruth's desperation to leave their home and willingness to almost risk an abortion. This deemphasises Ruth's reliance on realism to subvert racist and sexist structures of deceit. Rather than demonstrating the external structures that confine Ruth to the domestic sphere, the film refuses to examine the extent to which her dreams are formed by the social position she occupies. In doing so, studio executives "participated in the ongoing enactment of modern racism" whereby the systemic and institutional forces that produce and sustain white patriarchal hegemony are rendered invisible (Lipari 2004, 96).

Instead, the depiction of racism in the film is only allowed to be present in its most overt form, through the presence of Karl Lindner, the representative of the Clybourne Park Improvement Association. New scenes that Hansberry added in her original screenplay depicting more subtle forms of everyday racism and sexism also found their way to the "cutting-room floor" (Perry 2018, 115). In her screenplay, Hansberry provides more insight into Mama by introducing scenes where we witness her last day of work. These new scenes function to further subvert the Mammy stereotype that was attributed to African American women as a means of racial and socio-economic oppression. Margaret Wilkerson describes

the scene between Mama and her employer, Mrs. Holiday. In the scene, Mrs. Holiday voices doubts as to whether Mama can truly leave behind the child she has been employed to care for, perpetuating the “historic myth that mammies surely prefer their white charges over their own families” (Wilkerson quoted in Hansberry 1992, xxxvi). Hansberry destabilises this myth as Mama “curtly affirms that the good-bye is indeed a final one” and describes her past work experiences in which she has endured a number of other accounts of gendered racism (xxxvi). In choosing to ignore these pivotal scenes, the studio contributed to the construction of the image of the Mammy stereotype, an image of Black motherhood that was created for the purposes of economic exploitation. In doing so, studios allow for the continuation of the ‘controlling images’ and white patriarchal discourse to proliferate into popular culture.

Perhaps most crucially, it is precisely this discourse that is established through the ending of the film. In her play, Hansberry rejects the myth of the American Dream by highlighting the racist and patriarchal values inherent to this dream. The ambiguous ending of the play is replaced by one that overlooks the uncertainty and threat that the Younger family faces in their new home in Clybourne Park. It is reframed as a story of upward mobility, an angle that was encouraged by studio executive David Susskind. He asserted that the “point of this play is not about the race angle. It’s about the disparity of needs and ambitions which bring a middle-class family to disaster. The fact that the Negroes move into a white neighborhood has nothing to do with it” (Susskind quoted in Smith 2004, 323). Not only does he neglect the fact that the Younger family is a working-class, rather than middle-class family, but his statement demonstrates a blind ignorance towards the institutional structures that maintain racial oppression through housing discrimination. His (mis)interpretation of the message of the play reinforces the supposed ‘universalism’ for which it was both praised and critiqued. Hansberry originally intended to visually emphasise the “sinister” atmosphere of the new neighbourhood through scenes where the Youngers visit their new home (Hansberry quoted in Lipari 2004, 89). Her directions build upon this ominous setting as she describes the family being watched by “shadowy figures” and eyes that “look hard with a curiosity that, for the most part, is clearly hostile” (89). Although the Youngers do visit their new home in Petrie’s film, scenes that displayed the hostile gaze of their prospective neighbours were cut. This removal supports the inherent message that racism only exists in overt forms, in isolated incidents instigated by immoral individuals.

It also denies the Younger family the opportunity for resistance by asserting what bell hooks “the oppositional gaze” (1992 115). She examines the historical legacy of Black slaves who were punished for looking, and who learned to use the oppositional, or critical, gaze as

“a site of resistance” (116). This resistance, or “the ability to manipulate one’s gaze in the face of structures of domination” allows for the assertion of a degree of agency (115). In this sequence, the dominant gaze is forced upon the Youngers, and they resist this gaze simply by looking back. Cutting this sequence deprives the film of a key act of resistance in which the Younger women assert their agency through the subversive act of the oppositional gaze. It also deemphasises the reality of the threat that awaits them and diminishes the bravery of their choice to move despite the inherent risks. This removes the ambiguity present in the original ending of the play, and maintains the illusion of the universality of the American Dream.

### **3.2 American Playhouse Production: Bringing the Black domestic sphere to the screen**

In many ways, the PBS American Playhouse production of *Raisin* served to right some of the wrongs inflicted upon the 1961 adaptation of the play. Under Bill Duke’s direction, the play was unabridged and included a number of scenes that were cut from both the play’s original Broadway production and Petrie’s film. The medium of television lent itself to the inclusion of these previously neglected scenes, allowing for a longer running time than most commercial films intended for cinematic release. The full restoration of the play in the 1989 production is perhaps also a result of the way it spoke to prevailing issues in American society at the time. The production was released at a moment in American history where racial tensions were on the brink of explosion. The simmering racial tensions that would eventually lead to the 1991 beating of Rodney King and the 1992 LA Race Riots, perhaps most dramatically captured in Spike Lee’s *Do The Right Thing* released during the same year in 1989, showed that the themes of Hansberry’s work retained their relevance. The eighties also represented a key decade for Black feminist thinking and built on the work done by Black feminist scholars who had come to the forefront during the 1970s (Thomas 1998, 250). Revisiting the play in the late eighties allowed for a re-exploration of the relevance of the play’s themes in a post-civil rights movement and post-women’s liberation America. The significant cultural shifts that had occurred since the release of both the play and the Hollywood film, are perhaps what lent themselves to a more comprehensive visual representation of Hansberry’s work and its female protagonists.

Significant societal and political changes had occurred in the almost three decades between these two adaptations. The impact of these were also reflected in developments in key instruments of mass popular culture: the television and cinema. By the late eighties,

American cinema had seen the emergence of notable works in Black independent cinema. In a post-civil rights social landscape, the Black Power and Black Arts Movements led to the need for a more radical exploration of Black identity on screen. Black filmmakers such as Melvin Van Peebles explored these themes in films like *Sweet Sweetback's Baad Asssss Song* (1971), a film described by Huey P. Newton, co-founder of the Black Panther Party, as “the first truly revolutionary Black film ever made...presented to us by a Black man” (Newton quoted in Clark, 2021). The neorealist-inspired ‘LA Rebellion’ movement of the eighties sought to challenge existing cinematic traditions in their development of a distinct aesthetic that spoke to their “own ‘non-standard’ vision of Black people and culture” (Snead 1994, 117). Notable films of this era included Julie Dash’s *Illusions* (1982), Billy Woodberry’s *Bless Their Little Hearts* (1983), and Charles Burnett’s *Killer of Sheep*. By the time of Duke’s production of *Raisin*, directors like Spike Lee had already crossed the threshold of Black independent cinema and broken into mainstream consciousness in his breakthrough film, *She’s Gotta Have It* (1986) (Clark 2021). Lee, and others before him, helped to pave the way for productions such as Duke’s. This is perhaps why the 1989 production of *Raisin*, as a whole, enforces the crucial themes of Hansberry’s play and places particular significance on the agency of the Younger women.

One notable element of the 1989 production is that it does not stray far from Hansberry’s stage play. This is highlighted visually as the entirety of the film is set in the Younger’s home. In this production, the setting reveals the cramped and dark conditions of their home. The crucial elements of their apartment that Hansberry intended to emphasise in the 1961 film are restored through the presence of worn, threadbare furniture and the Younger’s *tiny* kitchen window. The setting reinforces the importance of the domestic sphere to the play, and serves as a constant visual reminder of why the Ruth and Lena are so desperate to leave. Ruth’s desperation to move and provide a better life for her family is also highlighted through characterisation. Starletta DuPois’ performance in the film grants Ruth the agency she was denied in the 1961 film as she portrays the character in a way that is far more assertive. In comparison to the 1961 film, she brings forth the sarcasm and sense of irony in her interactions with Walter. For example, when she says “I would *rather* be living in Buckingham Palace” as Walter tells her about his dreams, DuPois does so with pointed sarcasm (Duke 1989, emphasis added). The sense of agency with which she is portrayed highlights the ways in which Ruth uses her sarcasm as a means to assert her practical realism. This is another element highlighted in the Duke production as it gives equal weight to exploring the dreams of each member of the family. This is in contrast to the 1961 film,

which shifts the focus towards Walter. In the scene that crucially highlights Ruth's desperation to leave, when Lena informs Ruth and Walter that she has put the down payment on the new house, the 1961 film tracks Walter's reaction. In Duke's production, however, the camera is set up to capture DuPois' performance as Ruth practically explodes from joy. Her visible elation contrasts with the more muted display of emotion in Ruby Dee's performance of the same scene. The marked difference in the performance of the scene may speak to the context of the late 1980s, in which the precedent had already been set to allow for a more in-depth exploration of the Black experience. It is perhaps because of this that Duke is able to bring the audience directly face to face with the full extent of Ruth's undeniable desperation.

This is further emphasised through the inclusion of the previously cut scene with the Youngers' neighbour, Mrs. Johnson, who highlights the possible dangers that await the family in Clybourne Park. Mrs. Johnson's remarks on recent acts of violence targeting Black residents in white neighbourhoods explicitly point out the potential threat and hostility the Youngers may face in their new home. This sense of foreboding complicates the interpretation of the ending of the play as a happy one, one that acts as an embodiment of the universality of the American Dream. As I argued in the previous chapter, the ambiguity of the ending functions as a critique of this dream and its supposed universality. Ruth's dreams of home ownership and her desperation to leave their cramped, dark home despite the threat of harm are compounded by the setting, DuPois's performance and by the inclusion of the scene with Mrs. Johnson.

The inclusion of this scene also serves another function in Duke's production. The conversation between Mrs. Johnson and Lena highlights the political potential of the women as they discuss their conflicting views on Booker T. Washington, a prominent Black leader of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. As they discuss Walter's occupation as a chauffeur, Lena vehemently disputes Mrs. Johnson's statement that there's nothing wrong with being a chauffeur. Lena firmly states that "[t]here's plenty wrong with it...a man's hands was made to make things, or to turn the earth with – not to drive nobody's car for 'em – or – (*She looks at her own hands*) carry they slop jars" (Hansberry 1994, 103, italics in original). Her statement is indicative of the powerful sense of love and pride in oneself that she is determined to instil in her children. It reveals her desire for a life in which they can strive for more, a life she has worked tirelessly to create for them. Mama's act of love takes a political tone when Mrs. Johnson makes a reference to Washington. She responds to Lena's declaration, retorting, "[y]ou sure one proud-acting bunch of colored folks...I always thinks like Booker T. Washington said that time – 'Education has spoiled many a good plow hand'" (103). This

quote succinctly captures Washington's views that were made famous in his speech at the 1895 Atlanta Exposition, referred to by critics as the 'Atlanta Compromise'. In his speech he outlines the importance of Black self-improvement as a tool for progress, and that this self-improvement would be found in fields and factories rather than in books (Washington 1996, 100). Washington's views received widespread criticism, perhaps most famously from W.E.B. Du Bois, who disparaged Washington's "policy of submission" (Du Bois 1995, 323). Du Bois was highly critical of Washington's version of progress, which focused on economic development rather than social agitation, education, and an active struggle for equality. Mama reveals an inclination towards Du Bois' views in her dismissal of Washington, as she declares, "sounds just like him. The fool" (Hansberry 1994, 103). She goes on to further challenge Mrs. Johnson's categorisation of Washington as "one of our great men" with the question, "Who said so?" (103). This debate between the two women highlights the "revolutionary" side of Lena (Wilkerson 1986, 450). It also serves as an example of the way in which Hansberry merges the political with the domestic sphere, a key facet of Tricia Rose's theory of (inter)personal justice in which intimate spaces such as these serve as pivotal sites of political potential.

Revealing Mama's political potential also works to offset the stereotype of both the Mammy and the Matriarch. Mama challenges the humble, servile role of the Mammy stereotype by resisting the notion that this is the only alternative for either of her children. Not only does she label Washington a 'fool', but her actions demonstrate that she places higher value on education and the pursuit of one's dreams. She states her clear intention to allot a portion of the life insurance money for Beneatha's education, and also places her trust in Walter for him to pursue his own ambitions. In doing so, she also subverts the stereotype of the aggressive, emasculating Matriarch.

The 1989 production of *Raisin* also allows for the subversion of other stereotypes placed upon Black women, those that specifically relate to beauty ideals. These are destabilised through the character of Beneatha, whose decision to wear her hair natural is not only included in this adaptation but highlighted. Beneatha's act of resistance may not have been as shocking to viewers of the 1989 production as it would have been for audiences in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Many viewers, living in a post-'Black is beautiful' movement era, were likely to have been aware of the significance of this act having seen the outcome of this revolution. For those that were not aware, the 1989 production emphasises the controversiality of Beneatha's expression of self-pride through the reactions of the other characters. In Duke's production, this scene is re-enacted according to Hansberry's script,

highlighting the shock demonstrated by George, Walter and Ruth. All three characters voice their surprise, asking, “what have you done to your head?” and “what is the matter with your head?” (Duke 1989). Although both George and Ruth eventually acquiesce and affirm her choice, telling her “[i]t’s sharp”, Walter does not (Duke 1989). Instead, as Ruth starts to touch her own hair as if considering doing the same, he urges her against it, stating, “[o]h no! You leave yours alone baby” (Duke 1989). Walter’s reaction is indicative of an attempt to control Ruth’s agency over her own image as well as her freedom to resist the beauty ideals that were placed on Black women at the time.

Walter’s strong reaction also highlights how Hansberry used Beneatha’s hair as a tool of resistance long before her time. By the time the 1989 production was filmed, Hansberry’s play would have already been considered a historical drama. Viewing the scene from the present-day context of the late 1980s, audiences were likely to have been aware of how radical Beneatha’s act of self-determination would have been at the time. As I discussed in Chapter Two, in *Raisin* this act is used to subvert the racist and sexist beauty ideals that function as a means to control and devalue Black women.

This is further emphasised through Beneatha’s rejection of George, in which she asserts her own agency. When they return to the Younger’s apartment after an evening out, George makes advances towards her. As Beneatha rebuffs his several attempts to kiss her, George finally stands up in frustration exclaiming, “I don’t go out with you to discuss the nature of ‘quiet desperation’ or to hear all your thoughts” (Duke 1989). As Beneatha finally realises he is less interested in what she has to say than in her looks, she turns her back to him and cuts their evening short with a simple, but firm, “good night George” (Duke 1989). In doing so, she refuses to accept George’s act of reducing her to her appearance and instead chooses to assert her agency. Mama walks in only moments later, as George is about to exit, she quickly senses the situation and reaffirms Beneatha’s agency by repeating the words “good night George” as she holds the door for him to leave (Duke 1989). Despite their conflicting views on marriage, Lena exhibits a firm understanding of Beneatha’s choices, which is highlighted as Beneatha pauses and thanks Mama for “understanding me this time” (Duke 1989). This shared moment of understanding and solidarity in this intimate setting is one example of the politically conditioned love and Sisterhood that takes place between the Younger women.

Although these moments of solidarity take place throughout the play, it is visually enforced in a particularly striking manner at the end of the play. Walter initially calls the Clybourne Park Improvement Association representative, Mr. Linder, to accept his offer to

buy the Youngers out of their new home. However, Walter ultimately rejects this offer as a result of Mama's insistence on the radical power of love, which she uses to guide and strengthen her family. Instead of choosing the money, Walter makes a choice that restores his self-worth and pride. This moment is undoubtedly one in which Walter comes into his own, "kind of like a rainbow after the rain", as described by Mama (Duke 1989). However, the fact that Duke chooses to foreground the women rather than Walter shifts the focus from him and reframes his self-development as one that has been reinforced and sustained by the strength of these women. The way in which Hansberry positions the women as the backbone of the Younger family is visually translated for the screen in this crucial moment. As Lindner stands by the door, ready to leave, the camera frames him in a medium-close shot as he states, "I sure hope you people know what you're getting into" (Duke 1989). There is then a cut to a point-of-view shot from Linder's perspective as the Younger family slowly turns to face him without saying a word. The placement of the family members is interesting in this point-of-view shot, as it reinforces the strength and position of the three Younger women. In this shot, Walter and Travis stand in the background, partially hidden from view as they embrace. Ruth, Lena and Beneatha stand in the foreground as they stare back daringly at Linder. A cut back to Linder reveals his incredulous expression as he looks at them for a moment before turning and leaving silently. This sequence restores the 'oppositional gaze' that the women were denied in the 1961 film. They direct their collective gaze towards both him and the audience through the point-of-view angle of the shot. In this moment, they are able to use their gaze to assert their agency and transform an act that had historically been used as a tool of domination into a "site of resistance" (hooks 1992, 116). Their placement partly obscures Walter from the audience, and Lindner, so that Ruth, Lena and Beneatha are able to claim this site as their own, an indication of the political potential of these three women.

### **3.3 Kenny Leon's *Raisin*: contradictory representations of Ruth, Lena and Beneatha**

The most recent adaptation of *Raisin* to make its way to the screen is that of Kenny Leon's 2008 film, produced by ABC. This version lies somewhere in between the previous productions of the play, resulting in a somewhat contradictory representation of the female characters. Almost two decades had passed between the 1989 production and Kenny Leon's adaptation, and these had once again brought with them huge societal and political changes in American history. Barack Obama won the 2008 presidential campaign, becoming the 44<sup>th</sup>



president of the U.S. in 2009. This was a major sign of progress, notwithstanding the backlash that would follow eight years later. The period of time between these productions of *Raisin* also saw the emergence of what some scholars refer to as the third wave of feminism (Clark Mane 2012, 71). Although this wave has been difficult to pin down and define, one of the core elements is the emphasis placed on intersectionality, which built upon the feminist theorists of the eighties including Kimberlé Crenshaw and Judith Butler. According to scholars like R. Claire Snyder, it also saw a shift towards inclusivity, non-essentialist approaches, the importance of choice and the non-judgemental acceptance of the choices of other women (Snyder quoted in Clark Mane, 71). Some feminist scholars of the 1990s and early 2000s, however, disputed this claim. They argued that despite its intent, mainstream third-wave feminism's attempts at intersectionality resulted in tokenism in many cases and were not carried out in a way that was "fundamentally transformative" (72). In essence, then, although there were steps taken towards a more inclusive and intersectional feminism, these steps were inconsistent and not fully comprehensive. Tokenism, for example, meant that the voices of a select few from marginalised groups were heard, but in a manner that was more symbolic than genuine. Rather, they were included in the discourse for the sake of appearing inclusive.

The same could be said for the representation of Black women in film and television during this time. Although there was an initial rise in Black filmmaking in the nineties, following Spike Lee's immense commercial and critical success, the majority of the narratives represented were male-centred. Additionally, most of the Black actors who gained powerful positions in Hollywood at the time were predominantly male, including actors like Samuel L. Jackson, Will Smith and Denzel Washington (Rose 2016). While some of their films explored the intricacies of Black life in America, the general commercialisation of American independent cinema from the late eighties onwards eventually meant that Black cinema too was turned into "a commodity that could be co-opted by a larger industry" (Dash quoted in Rose 2016). By the 2000s, there was a large erasure of the contemporary Black experience from mainstream cinema, due to the "assumption, particularly outside the African-American community...that the battles had all been won" (Rose 2016). In many commercial films of this time, the Black experience was reduced to musical biopics, white-saviour narratives or films in which Black parts were consigned to secondary characters whose primary role was to support the white lead. This resulted in the disproportionate underrepresentation of realistic and intimate experiences of Black life in visual popular

culture. This disproportionality is even further magnified when it comes to representations of Black women on screen and the depiction of *their* stories.

It is through this the significant erasure of these experiences from the screen, that Hollywood has continued to contribute to the proliferation and normalisation of “whiteness” (Clark Mane 2012, 73). It was perhaps in response to the whiteness that dominated various mediums and conveyors of popular culture such as film and television that the 2010’s saw the re-emergence of Black American filmmaking. This time these films largely centred on the intimate lives of Black characters, for example in the works of Ryan Coogler, Ava DuVernay and Barry Jenkins. In many ways, Kenny Leon’s *Raisin* is a part of this re-emergence that sought to portray the experiences of Black Americans in a way that had been largely ignored for two decades.

Leon’s adaptation, however, is somewhat contradictory in its representations of the three Younger women. While Ruth and Lena Younger are depicted in a way that serves to highlight the feminist themes present in Hansberry’s stage play text, the portrayal of Beneatha is noticeably less radical than in prior productions. It is important to note that the 2008 film was adapted from the play into a teleplay by Paris Qualles. This means that it immediately differs from its predecessors in that there was less ‘direct’ involvement from Hansberry, as the 1961 screenplay was written by the playwright herself and the 1989 performance was an uncut, unabridged performance of her original play. What is interesting about this adaptation, however, is that Qualles and Leon chose to restore some of the cut scenes from Hansberry’s 1961 film screenplay. In doing so, scenes that were essential for allowing a deeper exploration of the characters finally made their way to the screen. Most significantly, it is the first time that all three of the Younger women are shown outside of the home. This serves not only to “lose all the feeling that it was a taped version of the stage adaptation...to create a more cinematic feel”, but also emphasises the subversion of racialised gender roles that is present in Hansberry’s stage play (Leon quoted in IndieWire 2008).

Depicting Mama on her last day of work is a significant moment that Hansberry had originally intended to include in the 1961 film but which was cut. In Leon’s film, the inclusion of these scenes has several functions. First, it rejects the stereotype of the Mammy. Lena is shown with Priscilla, the child she looks after, as she dresses her and sends her off to school. Lena’s light purple dress and white apron are both signifiers of her position as a domestic worker, which may initially seem like they fit the stereotypical portrayal of the nurturing Mammy. However, when Priscilla leaves for school, Lena waves at her from the window and then turns around. A close up shot of Lena’s face reveals a shift in her expression

that exposes her relief and joy at finally being able to leave the employ of the white family she works for. Capturing Lena's expression indicates her true feelings about her work and emphasises that she is there for economic reasons rather than to play the role of the "imagined Black woman mammy" (Hill Collins 2002, 73). It also exemplifies how some Black women "may play the mammy role in paid work settings" to ensure their economic survival (74). Not only does Lena's reaction demonstrate her awareness of the stereotypes and images created by racist patriarchal ideology to control Black women, but her astute ability to exploit these stereotypes as a survival mechanism.

The second function of revealing Lena at her work is to highlight the socio-economic differences between her employers and her own family. In this sequence, we see Lena leave her home while it is still dark outside. The Youngers' neighbour Mrs. Johnson calls out to her husband to get in the shower while "there's still hot water" as Lena passes by her (Leon 2008). There is then a cut to the moon before the camera pans down to show Lena exiting the apartment building. Lena is then shown catching the bus to Parkview before the camera cuts to frame her as she sits on the bus watching the sun rise. This is followed by a cut to Lena walking up to her employer's home, a huge mansion, in the early morning light. There is a stark difference between the Younger's apartment and that of her employer's, highlighting the huge economic disparity between these two families. That these economic disparities are also intricately tied to location is visually emphasised through the setting and *mise-en-scène*. The shots of the moon and sunrise act as temporal signifiers that indicate the physical distance Lena must travel on her commute to work. Additionally, there is a juxtaposition between the Younger's urban apartment, in which they must share a bathroom with the neighbours, and the spacious, upper-middle class suburban neighbourhood of Lena's employers. The sign on the bus Lena takes to work indicates that this neighbourhood is located somewhere in Parkview. According to a 1939 redlining map created by the HOLC, neighbourhoods in the Parkview area received either an 'A' or 'B' grade, meaning that they were considered minimal risks for receiving home loans (Coates 2014). This is no surprise, considering how the large, two-story house and its neat surrounding neighbourhood contrast with the cramped atmosphere of the Younger home. According to Leon, this was precisely his intention in depicting the Youngers out of the apartment. In an IndieWire interview he describes how he wanted to juxtapose their home with the outside world so that the audience could "return to the constricting home and really sense the place's claustrophobic conditions" through the characters (Leon quoted in IndieWire, 2008). Through this juxtaposition, Leon also draws awareness to the institutional structures of racism by heightening the issue of housing

segregation. Taking Lena outside of the Younger home emphasises the external factors that function as a means of repression, allowing for an exploration of the intimate impact of structural racism.

Placing the sequence of Lena's commute to work at the beginning of the film also foregrounds the dream of homeownership that Lena shares with Ruth. The importance of dreams such as theirs is accentuated from the beginning by a voiceover that accompanies the opening sequence of the film. In this sequence, a single continuous shot shows the street outside the Youngers' home as it comes to life in the early morning hours. The shot ends inside the stairwell just as Lena greets Mrs. Johnson. The accompanying voiceover, recited by Morgan Freeman, is of the Langston Hughes poem that inspired the title of Hansberry's play. The recital of the poem that accompanies the beginning of the film helps to underscore the powerful questions raised in Hansberry's work. Because the audience is left with the lingering question of Hughes' poem just before Lena enters the frame, they are invited to particularly focus their attention on her dreams. The subsequent juxtaposition of the Youngers' home on the Chicago South Side with the affluent neighbourhood of white residents further highlights this dream as well as the obstacles that lie between them. The inclusion of Hughes' poem was yet another element that was cut from Hansberry's original 1961 film screenplay. Leon restores this scene in his adaptation, although in a modified form in which the dream of homeownership is highlighted. This lends greater significance to the dreams of Lena and Ruth, dreams that are motivated by love and selflessness rather than individual motivation. This is a stark contrast to Petrie's 1961 film, in which Walter and his dream of entrepreneurship is placed at the centre of the narrative. Instead, Leon shifts the focus, so that Lena and Ruth's dreams are foregrounded. The sequence depicting Lena's commute to work is followed by a cut to an establishing shot of the Youngers' apartment building, followed by Ruth making breakfast. Rather than framing Walter as the protagonist, Leon chooses to introduce Lena and Ruth to the audience first.

Inside the Younger's flat, Leon makes an interesting use of camera technique to draw the audience into their reality, particularly that of Ruth, who spends the most time in this space. The atmosphere of claustrophobia in their home is heightened through the frequent use of handheld cameras inside their apartment. The camera movements and mid-to-close up shots lend a sense of intimacy and realism to these scenes as the audience are witness to their personal relationships and lives inside their home. These scenes capture the emphasis Tricia Rose later places on the intimate nature of domestic spaces in her theory of (inter)personal justice. This theory seems to be translated, to an extent, visually in these moments which

highlight how these intimate, interpersonal spaces are the sites in which “dreams are made real and are uttered quietly and hopefully” (Rose 2014, 31). The unsteadiness of the camera in these interior shots is perhaps reflective of the instability of these dreams in the face of racial, and sexual, oppression.

The camera techniques and juxtaposed shots in the opening sequence also reinforce the sense of desperation that emanates from Ruth in the film. This is also highly felt in both Hansberry’s stage play and in the 1989 production. In Leon’s adaptation, this is heightened through Ruth’s actions outside of the home. While the prior versions of *Raisin* reveal that Ruth considers terminating her pregnancy due to her socioeconomic conditions, her experience and antagonism over her decision is far more intimately explored in Leon’s adaptation. Leon and Qualles include two scenes where Ruth visits a hairdressing salon that is revealed to be operating, also, as an illegal abortion clinic. In the first scene she makes the appointment and gives the down payment, actions which are described in previous versions of *Raisin* but not shown. In the second scene, Ruth arrives in order to proceed with the appointment but changes her mind and decides not to terminate her pregnancy. By witnessing her emotional state as she experiences this ordeal, the audience is given intimate access to Ruth’s inner world in a way that has not been previously examined in as deep a manner. It also emphasises, even further than in prior version, Ruth’s acute awareness of the reality that shapes their lives – so much so that she would even risk her own life to protect her family. This notion is stressed when Lena reveals Ruth’s intention to have an abortion to Walter. Walter reacts with denial, claiming that “you don’t know Ruth Mama, if you think that she would do something like that”, exemplifying his wilful ignorance of Ruth’s reality (Leon 2008). It highlights the stark contrast between their dreams, as Walter fantasises about his business whereas Ruth’s dreams are rooted in daily survival. Ruth responds to Walter, firmly stating, “Yes I would too, Walter. I already made plans...I gave the woman a down payment” (Leon 2008). In doing so, she challenges his preconceptions by revealing her ability to take matters into her own hands and therefore asserts her agency.

While both Lena and Ruth exhibit the ability to assert their own agency in Leon’s film, Beneatha, who is in many ways the most visibly radical in prior versions is, strangely, far less radical in this adaptation. There are some moments in which she could be viewed as more assertive or radical in her beliefs. For example, Leon’s version includes another scene that Hansberry wrote in her original film screenplay but which was left out of the final version. Like the 1961 Petrie version, the Youngers visit their home in their new neighbourhood. However, in contrast to the 1961 film, the shots that reveal the hostile stares

of their prospective neighbours are included. In response to this hostility, Ruth and Walter simply head back indoors while Beneatha calls out, “Howdy-do, neighbours! Howdy-do!” (Leon 2008). Her refusal to passively accept their hostile gaze is an assertive act that is suggestive of Beneatha’s political potential.

Despite this, however, the general depiction of Beneatha in this film is contradictory, as some of her feminist and political views are sacrificed in order to develop a romance narrative with Asagai. Her interest in exploring her heritage, identity, and anti-colonialism, in particular, are portrayed as being the result of her feelings for Asagai rather than stemming from her own political interests. Although the promise of romance is also depicted in the prior versions, it is made abundantly clear in those earlier versions that Beneatha’s primary goal is to pursue her dream of becoming a doctor. This is an element that is dampened in Leon’s adaptation. In prior versions of Beneatha and Asagai’s final scene, after Walter has lost the money for Beneatha’s tuition, Beneatha is devastated at the prospect that her future and dream have been taken away from her. Asagai proposes that she move to Nigeria with him, and Beneatha considers his question as it may give her the opportunity to practice medicine and become a doctor. In the stage play, she tells Mama of Asagai’s marriage proposal. When Mama retorts that she’s too young to marry anyone, Beneatha clarifies that she could “go to Africa, Mama – be a doctor in Africa...” (Hansberry 1994, 150). In Leon’s film, however, there is no mention of the possibility that she could realise her dream in Nigeria. Instead, Asagai’s proposal is delivered as more of a direct statement rather than the “a bit of a suggestion” it is in Hansberry’s play (136). Instead, Asagai tells Beneatha, “I will help you. When all of this is over you will come with me” (Leon 2008). By framing his proposal as a statement rather than a question, Asagai removes Beneatha’s say in the matter. By declaring that he will help her, he also places her in a position of weakness, where she is in need of his help. Not only, then, is Beneatha’s possible move to Nigeria reframed as a simple marriage proposal, but her sense of agency in questions over her future is taken away.

This serves to diminish the feminist and political aspects of her character that are present in the prior versions. Framing her interests as primarily romantic, rather than feminist, political or self-determining contributes to the way in which Beneatha is represented in an almost “hyperfeminine” manner (Murnan & Byrne 1991, 480). Sarah K. Murnan and Donn Byrne define hyperfemininity as an “exaggerated adherence to a stereotypic feminine gender role” and posit that those who adhere to these roles measure their success “by developing and maintaining a relationship with a man” (1991, 480). One of the primary ways that Beneatha

subverts stereotypes of racialised gender roles in Hansberry's text is by wearing her hair natural. This act, as in the 1961 film, is not present in Leon's film.

By removing many of the key ways in which Beneatha *does* subvert stereotypes of racialised beauty ideals and gender roles in Hansberry's text, Leon's adaptation presents a rather contradictory depiction of the three women. Ruth and Lena are presented as being in charge of their own agency, which speaks to their strength and political potential. However, the diminished radicalism and hyperfeminine elements in the representation of Beneatha portray her in a way that is more in line with traditional gender roles. These contradictory depictions of the Younger women are not only demonstrative of the need for increased and more consistent portrayals of the experiences of Black women across popular mediums, from the theatre to literary works to film and television. While more "compelling representations of black femaleness" have been constructed in these mediums in recent years, there is still considerable room for improvement (hooks 1992, 119).

## Conclusion

Despite being produced many decades apart, if there is at least one thing that these three screen adaptations have in common it is that they highlight the enduring relevance of Hansberry's work. Although by now her famous play is a historical drama, there are reasons why *Raisin* is, and has been, revived time and time again, both on stage and on screen. It was recently, for example, produced by the Yale Repertory Theatre for their 2019-2020 season to mark the 400 years that had passed since the first slave ship from Africa arrived at Jamestown, Virginia. Although all performances were cancelled as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, the fact that Hansberry's work was selected to commemorate this event is indicative of its persisting significance. Ashley M. Thomas, the dramaturg of this production, describes how the play speaks to contemporary issues, particularly the legacy of redlining that continues to disproportionately affect Black communities in many parts of the United States. She states that while the play is a celebration of the "resiliency of the Black American spirit" it must also "serve as a reminder that America must still travel towards justice" (Thomas 2020, 7). It is perhaps precisely this sentiment that accounts for why this work resonates with contemporary audiences. The fact that it strikes so close to home to these audiences is, unfortunately, a testament to the very necessary labour that remains to be done when it comes to questions of race and gender, both in the U.S. and abroad.

This is a notion that is poignantly captured by Robert Nemiroff in his 1988 introduction to the play, in which he wrote:

If we ever reach a time when the racial madness that afflicts America is at last truly behind us – as obviously *we must* if we are to survive in a world composed four-fifths of peoples of color – then I believe *A Raisin in the Sun* will remain no less pertinent. For at the deepest level it is not a specific situation but the human condition, human aspirations, and human relationships...and the endless struggle against human oppression...that are at the heart of such plays. It is not surprising therefore that in each generation we recognize ourselves in them anew. (Nemiroff quoted in Hansberry 1994, 14, emphasis in original)

If we examine recent events in America, it is evident that the time Nemiroff refers to is not truly behind us. 2020 saw the emergence of one of the largest protest movements in decades as the brutal murder of George Floyd in late May sparked Black Lives Matter demonstrations across the globe. These protests made viscerally clear the deep-rooted structures of racism that remained ingrained in U.S. society, politics, culture and institutions, centuries after the



abolishment of slavery. In a 2020 interview she conducted with Angela Davis for a special issue of *Vanity Fair*, Ava DuVernay refers to the current period in American history as a “racial reckoning” (DuVernay 2020). In the interview they discuss the significance of this exact moment and the opportunity it offers to bring about much-needed change. Davis describes the protests of 2020 as the “perfect example of our being able to seize this moment and turn it into something that’s radical and transformative” (DuVernay 2020). Given Hansberry’s astute portrayal of the struggle against gendered and racialised oppression in *Raisin*, it is no wonder, then, that the work remains just as pertinent, even sixty years later.

The significance of Hansberry’s play is reflected in the recent scholarly work that has focused not only on re-examining Hansberry’s works but also on her own life as an activist and radical. One notable aspect of this recent work is a greater consideration of the extent to which *Raisin* has been misunderstood by critics and the public alike. The shift between its initial reception and the way it has later been viewed is exemplified in the retraction of a critique made by one of *Raisin*’s harshest critics at the time of its release. Amiri Baraka, a contemporary of Hansberry’s who was a prominent Black writer, poet and activist, initially dismissed *Raisin* as “middle class” and a work of “passive resistance” yet later admitted to having “missed the essence of the work” (Baraka 1986). In a 1986 article in the Washington Post Baraka wrote, “[t]he concerns I once dismissed as ‘middle class’...actually reflect the essence of black will to defeat segregation, discrimination and oppression” (1986). In his retraction he described *Raisin* as a play that depicts the “accurate telling and stunning vision of the real struggle” (Baraka 1986). Baraka’s renunciation of his prior criticisms was an early sign that Hansberry had been largely misread. A more recent body of biographical and scholarly works continue this reassessment, not only of *Raisin* but of Hansberry’s own life and politics. In addition to the scholarly and biographical works by Tricia Rose, Cheryl Higashida, Erin Chapman and Imani Perry discussed in this thesis, recent documentaries such as Tracy Heather Strains’ 2017 film *Sighted Eyes/Feeling Heart* also indicate the rising interest in Hansberry herself.

The current excavation of sorts that is being carried out on Hansberry’s life points to the significant position she continues to hold in the American, Black, and feminist literary traditions. This sentiment is voiced by Tricia Rose and Cornel West in a recent episode of their podcast, *The Tight Rope*. The episode, which aired on March 11, 2021, was titled, “Lorraine Hansberry & Gwendolyn Brooks: Darlings of the White Liberal Establishment?”. In it West and Rose discuss the extent to which the works of both Hansberry and Brooks have been misinterpreted as less radical, which accounts for why they were so readily accepted by

white audiences and the white liberal establishment. Speaking of Hansberry, West jokes, “they didn’t know what they were gettin’ themselves into. They didn’t know she was a revolutionary” (Rose and West, 2021). In this thesis, I have attempted to demonstrate the ways in which Hansberry’s revolutionary persona is present in *Raisin*, particularly in terms of her feminist and political radicalism that were arguably far ahead of her time. An in-depth examination of *Raisin*, and its various adaptations, reveals the complex, multi-layered, and immensely *intimate* effect of racialised and gendered oppression that is at the centre of Hansberry’s work.

Using a Black feminist lens to carry out this examination highlights the tools utilised by the female protagonists to resist the gendered and racialised nature of their oppression. It is precisely this intersection of race and gender that is at the forefront of Black feminist theory today. Hill Collins refers to this as the “‘new’ racism” in which gender plays a central role in racist beliefs because racism and sexism are so deeply entwined with one another (2004, 5). The result of this is the construction of a “Black gender ideology that shapes ideas about Black masculinity and Black femininity” (Hill Collins 2004, 6). In this thesis, I primarily chose to focus on the ways in which the intersecting oppression of race and gender impacts the three women of the Younger family, Beneatha, Ruth, and Mama. This is partly due to the scope of the thesis but also because a large body of work has already focused on the character of Walter Lee Younger. Nevertheless, this arguably causes an imbalance that perhaps prevents a full exploration of the depth of Hansberry’s work. A crucial area for future research would be to examine how the gendered and racialised expectations that are placed on Walter as Black *man* impact his relationship to the women in the play. A deeper analysis of the ways in which he has internalised the racist and patriarchal values of the society that surrounds him may help to shed further light on the key themes that Hansberry presents in *Raisin*.

Not only is this racialised gender ideology deeply harmful to the individual but it also has damaging consequences for entire communities. It is precisely this type of ideology that has dictated the ways in which Black women and men have been represented across mediums. The comparison of *Raisin* to its screen adaptations illuminates the need to examine the ways in which the works of other Black female writers have been translated or adapted to the screen. An analysis of the film adaptations of Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple*, Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*, or Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, for example, could provide fruitful examples of how Black female characters are represented on screen as opposed to their literary originals. This issue of representation, after all, is an incredibly

important one. This is particularly the case for mediums that are consumed en masse, namely, film and television. While steps have been taken in more recent years to address this issue, it is often carried out only on a superficial level. According to DuVernay, the terms ‘diversity’ and ‘inclusion’ are often thrown around in the entertainment industry but still serve primarily as “buzzwords” used for the sake of *appearing* intersectional (DuVernay, 2020).

Communities and groups who have long been denied agency over their own image across a variety of mediums, particularly within popular culture, then, still continue to be stereotyped, misrepresented, or worse still, erased. As Angela Davis points out, “[d]iversity and inclusion without substantive change, without *radical* change, accomplishes nothing” (DuVernay, 2020, italics in original). It is this radical change that is precisely at the root of Hansberry’s intimate representation of the lived experiences of Black women *and* men in *A Raisin in the Sun*. Her work continues to remain significant in these precarious times in which we live, and is likely to grow even more so as more light continues to be shed on her radicalism. Although it may have taken over half a century, perhaps we are finally able to collectively gain a deeper appreciation of her literary genius and power as a writer, activist – and, perhaps most importantly, as a revolutionary.

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